

Decanus

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Decanus

by [preserumping](#)

Summary

Like grains of sand in an hourglass, the memories trickled slowly but surely down through the ages. Levi remembered. He remembered it all.

A sequel to "To You, Two Thousand Years Away"

Notes

Well, you guys asked for a sequel, so here it is. I know, I know, I said I wasn't going to do one. Never listen to a thing I say. Except this next bit, because it's important!

If you're new, the first part is [here](#). I highly recommend you read it before starting this story, as I doubt it would make much sense. You will find this tale picks up somewhere between six months and a year after the other ended.

And so, without further ado, we dive straight into reincarnation trope hell.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Levi did his best not to look down and focused his attention instead on getting a firm grip on each new rung. It did not help matters that the rope ladder seemed to him to be in constant, sickening motion. Strictly speaking, Levi did not *have* to join Eren and Dr. Shadis in the treetops. In fact, if Eren fell, he would be just as useless thirty meters up as he would be on the ground, but that was beside the point. Eren had asked him to come, and as much as Levi's work had nothing to do with the workings of military maneuver gear, he found himself agreeing to witness the momentous occasion of its first use in almost two millenia.

The event had been meticulously planned for months. Dr. Shadis was the first to suggest it. He had contacted Levi introducing himself as a historical physicist. He and his team had apparently been working for a number of years on a fully-operation, historically-accurate Edenite Military Maneuvering Apparatus which they called EMMA for short. After getting their hands the real set that had survived with Eren, they had gone on to make some minor adjustments, and after extensive preliminary testing felt it may actually work. They sought Eren's advice on the design, but it was Eren himself who excitedly asked if he could actually use it.

There was no dissuading him, and there were many voices piping up to say that this was not an opportunity to be passed up. And so it was that Levi now found himself in a wooded zipline course, being helped up onto one of its tallest platforms. Eren was abuzz with excitement, constantly adjusting his myriad of belts and running over to the edge to check on the pulley system hoisting up the EMMA. Finally, Dr. Shadis just let him pull the equipment up himself just to give the boy something with which to occupy his hands, and went to confirm that all cameras were operation. There were a number of them scattered throughout the treetops along Eren's planned course to catch every movement, though calling it a course might be an overstatement. The finishing platform was visible from where Levi stood. It was a straight shot slightly above the platform they were on now, with plenty to hook into along the way, but something about it still nagged at the back of Levi's mind despite all the math confirming it could be done.

Eren needed no assistance to strap on the EMMA.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Shadis asked him.

Eren gave the gas triggers a final test pull and nodded. His smile was threatening to split his face apart.

“Then just go as planned at the countdown” the physicist told him sternly before turning to his walkie talkie. “Roll cameras on ten. Starting at Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen...”

Eren peered over the edge of the platform to the forest floor before turning to Levi and pointing downwards questioningly.

“Nets?” he whispered.

“In case you fall,” Levi answered. They were strung up especially for EMMA testing. Eren was much too valuable to lose, but protecting him was hard when the boy absolutely refused any other precautions. Even Dr. Shadis had to agree that safety wires and excess padding would do more to interfere with Eren’s ability to move as he naturally would than serve in keeping him safer.

Eren frowned, but there was a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Don’t try anything,” Levi warned.

Eren smiled. It looked too much like a smirk.

“Four,” Dr. Shadis counted. “Three. Two.”

Eren backed away from the edge. This was certainly not in the plan; he was to take off from standing, but there was no time to correct for it. At one, he broke into a sprint.

“Hey!” Dr. Shadis bellowed.

Eren leaped. Levi found himself at the edge in a split second, his fingers gripping the guard rail. Before he could so much as shout, two hooks flew from the foliage with a hiss of compressed gas. Eren flew back into sight like a blur, did a full flip, and shot away with a whoop of joy.

“Keep filming!” the physicist yelled into his handheld device. “Try and follow his movements.”

Levi’s vision tunneled. Eren wasn’t following the set course, but somehow Levi knew the course he would take. He couldn’t even begin to explain how he knew, but suddenly he wasn’t just looking at a random assortment of trees and branches, but at a mental map. All possible courses were clear. Eren hardly stuck to the optimal one, but this allowed him a number of impressive turns. Each time one of his hooks burrowed into the bark, Levi knew as if by instinct when he should add more gas, how fast he should turn a corner, how far he needed to lean to pull if off, when he should dislodge the grapple...

For a split second, something he couldn’t put his finger on became crystal clear. The epiphany struck like lightening and split his head with deafening pain. His vision momentarily blacked out and his knees weakened, but he remained standing with the guardrail for support. For a second he thought he might be sick, but the worst of it passed as quickly as it had come, leaving only a headache in its wake. Levi rubbed his temple and looked up to see Eren waving to him from the other platform. He raised a hand in greeting back.

“Use the zipline to return!” Dr. Shadis yelled to no avail. Eren saw no point to it when he could just use his EMMA. This time, at least, he took the prescribe path.

When he landed, the physicist was positively red in the face with rage, but there was little he could do. Eren was his only subject, so there was no dismissing him. Instead he uselessly sputtered questions at him as Eren skipped back over to Levi.

“Good?” he asked. He was like a child.

Levi gave him a curt nod. His headache was quickly spinning into a migraine. He wasn’t as good at hiding it as he might have hoped.

“Are you okay?” Eren said.

“Fine,” he replied. “Just very strong...” he wasn’t sure if there was a German equivalent. “...*déjà vu*. No, *déjà connu*.” Eren cocked his head. “It means—”

At that moment, Dr. Shadis stormed up behind Eren and, clamping a massive hand on the boy’s shoulder, turned him around to face him.

“Are you listening to me?” he boomed.

Eren swallowed and nodded. Levi looked away. On the nearest tree trunk, he spotted one of the holes made by the EMMA’s hooks.

Déjà connu. Already known.

Chapter End Notes

Writing a sequel by popular demand is a dangerous road, my friends. I have failed before, and I’m not the only one. If you want to see this through to the end with me, do not ever hesitate to say so, as your hesitation may mean I never sit down to write the rest. I need to be reminded that there are people on the other end that I’m letting down if I stop. So please, speak to me. What did you like? How did it make you feel? What do you want to see?

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of your lovely comments! This was one of those chapters I that didn't want to write because I was too excited for what happened afterward, but after all the love you showered me with I just couldn't let you down!

Ugh, I hope you like.

It was difficult to explain to Eren that he could not actually keep the EMMA. Luckily, the news was broken to him after he had already been instructed to take it off, else somebody would have had the miserable job of trying to catch him. Instead, Levi had to deal with his sulking the whole way home. Eren only perked up once during the entire trip, and that was when the food trolley came by on the train.

“Would you like anything?” the woman asked him.

Eren looked excitedly from her face to her name tag. It read Mina Caroline.

“Go on,” Levi told him before he wasted too much time. Instead of answering, however, Eren broke into his native tongue.

What he said was phrased like a question but the words were spoken too quickly for Levi to identify them. Still, he had heard Eren ask the same thing before of seemingly random people. The literal meaning of the question made no sense when translated, but Eren always refused to elaborate.

“Pardon?” the woman asked.

Eren appeared crushed for a moment before he crossed his arms and slumped into his seat.

“He won’t have anything,” Levi explained. When the woman moved on he shot Eren a look. “That was rude,” he told him.

Eren scoffed and spent the rest of the commute looking out the window, his mood seemingly even more sour than before.

There was still daylight by the time they made it back to Paris, so Levi swallowed a capsule for his headache, left Eren with instructions for dinner and a few episodes of *Nature*, and headed in for the lab. It was a nice reprieve from the day’s excitement—safe, quiet, and clean.

Despite the late hour, the lights were still on in the sanitation area which meant someone was still around. Levi peeked through the glass on the door to see who it was. At first glance it was just Gunther, his head bent over a manuscript. Then Levi blinked.

Blood. On the floor, on the walls, on the manuscript, on the blades of grass and bark and gear. Gunther's head hung at a nauseating angle from his neck being half-severed shortly above his nape. White bone glistened under electric lights.

Levi flung the door open and Gunther looked up.

“Sir?” he asked.

Every surface was pristine. Levi swallowed a lump in his throat. “Nevermind,” he mumbled and closed the door. His headache was back, and the sight of his hand on the doorknob was shifting slightly like he had spent too long looking at an optical illusion. He tried to shake it off as he proceeded to his office.

The *déjà vu* was nagging at him again, but this time it was accompanied not by a knowing but by a feeling. It tasted of loss with just a touch of betrayal, but there was understanding in it, too. It left a bitter taste in Levi's mouth and filled his head with cotton, so much so that he didn't realize he was about to walk into Petra until it was nearly too late. She had been punching something into her phone and didn't notice either. He caught a glimpse of gore splashed across her surprised face, but one blink and it was gone.

“Oh, sorry!” she chimed as she stepped back. “How was your trip?” It took one look at Levi for her smile to disappear. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Levi grimaced at the pain splitting his head. “It was fine.”

“Are you sure?” Petra asked as he stepped around her. “You're pale as death.”

“It's just a migraine,” he said as he rummaged in his pocket and pulled out his keys. His vision was swimming again, and it took him a few tries to get the key into the lock.

He didn't have to look up at Petra's face to hear the concern in her voice. “You know, if it's really bad you should probably see a doctor.”

“It's fine,” Levi said when he finally got his door open. “Don't worry about it.”

He disappeared inside before she could say anything else and collapsed at his desk with his head in his hands. Petra's blood-splattered face remained imbedded in his vision even when he closed his eyes, her hair shifting in a breeze that wasn't there. Levi pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets until the image was replaced with meaningless color. He was just tired, that was all, but since he was already here there was no sense going back without getting work done first. Burying himself in academics solved most problems. This too would pass.

Levi took another pain pill and set to work.

That night he dreamt. It was not a pleasant dream, but Levi could remember none of the details when he found himself inexplicably awake in the first hours of the morning. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw shadow standing at his bedside, but when he propped himself up on his elbows and flicked on the lights it was only Eren. There was a wild look in his eyes. Levi had to glance around to make sure everything was alright, but the only thing off about his bedroom was the wide-open door. It had probably been Eren opening it that had woken him.

“Why aren’t you in bed?” Levi asked, perhaps too harshly.

A terrified smile played at the corner of Eren’s mouth, or perhaps that was just the light. “You were talking,” he said very slowly and very quietly.

Levi sat up and rubbed his head. His headache was already starting to come back. “I’m sorry if I woke you. Go back to sleep.”

“You’re still doing it,” Eren said. His eyes were wide and his voice was still eerily quiet and level. He was definitely smiling now.

Levi considered the statement to try and unravel what Eren meant. It took him trying to pull the words apart individually to realize they were not German, or even French. For that matter, it was no living language at all. The room suddenly spun.

“Nevermind it,” he said hurriedly, in German this time. It took a surprising effort to switch his thinking over. “Go to sleep.”

Eren’s smile faded. He said something in his native tongue, and Levi was actually relieved he no longer understood him as readily as he just had.

“What was that?”

“Do you remember?” Eren asked exasperatedly, taking Levi’s lead in choice of language.

“Remember what?” His head was killing him. He reached for the bottle he had left on his bedside table.

Eren dropped down on his knees by the bedside. “Everything! Fight! Titans! *Legatus* Irwin! You said! You said! I heard you!”

Levi swallowed the pills dry. “Are you sure you weren’t the one dreaming.”

Eren searched his face with a look of betrayed desperation. His fingers gripped the edge of the bed so tightly his knuckles were white. “Yes,” he said through gritted teeth.

Levi didn’t know how to answer. Eren clearly wanted something from him that he could not give. All he could think to say to him was, “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Eren sucked in air through flared nostrils, held his breath, and then exhaled his question. It was the one he had asked to the woman on the train, to Dr. Shadis, to Levi’s lab, yet this time it carried more weight than any of the previous times combined. Levi didn’t understand it

then, but he understood now. The answer sat like lead on the tip of his tongue. Eren must have seen it in his face because his eyes lit.

“Remember,” he whispered in his native tongue. His hands shaking, he straightened up and slowly, slowly, like he was handling soap bubbles, curled a fist into the Edenite salute. “Decane,” His voice was shaking. There was a manic grin plastered across his face. “Remember.”

A wave of pain washed through Levi’s head as he struggled to draw together wisps of thought too ephemeral to grasp.

At the same instant the phone rang, and suddenly all the answers were evaporated to the aether. There was only one person who would call at such inappropriate hours, and she would keep calling until Levi picked up. The look on Eren’s face when he did was almost more painful than the headache.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” he said into the receiver.

“Um... I do now!” Hanji chirped. “Don’t worry though, this is totally worth it.”

“Oh, it better be,” Levi said as he massaged the bridge of his nose.

“You’ll never believe what I’m looking at right now.”

“What is it?” Levi asked through gritted teeth.

“I just said you won’t believe it!” He could hear her grin through the phone. “You have to come down here. You *need* to see this.”

“I do, do I?”

“I’m emailing you the directions now. Call me back at this number when you get here. I promise promise *promise* you won’t regret this!”

Levi had the hold the phone a little away from his ear to keep from going deaf. “Should I bring Eren?”

“You can if you want to,” Hanji answered. “That might be a good idea, actually. Yeah, bring Eren. See you guys tomorrow!”

She hung up before Levi could protest. Eren was looking at him with a thousand questions in his eyes.

“Looks like we’re travelling again tomorrow,” he told him.

Evidently it was not the answer Eren had hoped for.

The lab Hanji had sent them to was in Frankfurt. Levi called when they got off the train, and by the time their bus got them to the right street Hanji was out waiting for them. She swiped

them both into the building and took the steps two at a time.

“You look like hell,” she told Levi. “Do you ever sleep?”

“Yes,” Levi replied bluntly. “But some maniac phoned my house last night at half four.”

“Hey now,” Hanji retorted. “I didn’t sleep either. It’s all just too exciting!” She turned to Eren. “Do you have any idea what we do here?”

Eren shook his head.

“Well,” Hanji’s eyes flashed. “Do you remember how we found all those bodies at Humanity’s Summit seven months ago?” Eren nodded. “Their faces were all gross and shriveled, right?” Another nod, this one more hesitant. “So what we did was we took a... a 3D picture of their heads, and then we put that in the computer.”

“Eren still doesn’t really understand computers,” Levi pointed out.

“Well then imagine we made a model of their heads,” Hanji continued. “And then we did a bunch of math on the bones to see how the muscles and fat were attached, you know? And then we put skin over that so we could see what these people looked like when they were alive.”

This caught Eren’s attention. Hanji beamed and swiped her card on yet another set of doors to gain access.

“Pretty cool, right? I’d love it if you took a look to see if you recognize any of the faces. That brings me to why I called you in the first place, actually. Levi,” she swiped the group into an empty computer lab. Eren and Levi hung back while she logged into the machine at the front of the room, which was connected to a large projector.

“Last night we finished one of the reconstructions and we were trying to decide what kind of hair and eye color to give him, cause that kind of stuff doesn’t preserve with the skull,” Hanji went on, “and I joked that he kinda looked like you so we merged him with some old photos I have, and oh man, you really need to see this.”

Levi crossed his arms. “You dragged us all the way down here to show me a computer generated rendering of some guy with my hair photoshopped on him?”

“Not quite.” Hanji grinned and picked a small remote off the top of the computer’s CPU. A the press of a button, the projector lit up. A picture of a man’s face filled the screen.

“Ah!” Eren exclaimed. Forgetting his manners entirely, he pointed at the portrait and jumped up and down. Translation was beyond him, but Levi was paying too little attention to him to know what he was saying. Instead, all of his attention was focused on the reconstruction.

It could have been his reflection. Even without the hair, it still had his nose, his chin, his cheekbones.

“We’re sure it’s accurate,” he heard Hanji say as if from a great distance.

It was. Of course it was. The world spiraled inward until the only dimension was the space between Levi and the projection. The answers. The answers he had been grasping for were in its eyes, his eyes, their eyes. He felt like he could reach them now, but it was exactly like trying to break through to the surface of a pool of molasses. He couldn't seem to be able to breathe but the air was just there, just out of reach, he has to push a little further and he'd be able to touch it. He felt the headache creep up on him but he didn't resist it this time. He knew then that whatever he was looking for lay just beyond.

When it hit, the pain was no longer isolated to his head. It shot straight down to his toes and the end of every finger. He heard Eren scream somewhere very far away, but it didn't matter. Levi remembered. He remembered it all.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I've written and rewritten this chapter at least three times and I still don't like it. This sequel has just been a string of disappointments, hasn't it? I was hoping at least a few people would catch on to what I was building up to in the last chapter. I'm sorry I failed you. Hopefully the next chapter will make up for it? Fingers crossed?

(Don't read the end notes until the end because spoilers)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The smell here reminded Eren a little of Levi's lab, but where the lab also sometimes smelled of old paper or ink or soap, the air in the hospital just smelled stale. The windows would not open, either. In the eternal silence, the sound of Hanji nervously tapping her foot was too loud against the tiles. Eren shot her a look in her direction and the sound stopped. Now the only noise was the slight crackle of the vent and the buzz of the lights. Soon that became deafening, too.

Hanji cleared her throat and began to tap her fingertips against the plastic arm of the chair. Eren glared at her again. He wanted nothing better than to stand up and yell and hurl his chair across the room if it would make the wait go any faster, but it wouldn't. Nothing would, and being powerless was the worst feeling in the world. He gripped his own wrist tightly enough that the scars from his last transformation attempt stood out against his skin. Powerless was all he was nowadays, it seemed.

“So,” Hanji breathed. She drummed her fingers on her knees a few times and loosed up her shoulders. Eren looked at her but didn't say anything. Hanji held his gaze a moment before changing her mind and looking away. It was not hard to puzzle out that she blamed herself, and as much as Eren wanted that to be true he knew the fault was mostly his. He pushed when he had promised himself he wouldn't, pushed harder when hope said to keep going and judgement said to hold back, and now the cost was that the punishment was not even his to bear.

He buried his face in his hands to blot out the memory of Levi convulsing on the floor.

“Did you know,” Hanji began again, “that males and females were in almost equal proportion in the population of soldiers we recovered?” Her foot was vibrating against the floor again. Her voice was shaking a little, too. “That really tells us a lot. We've never had such a clear picture of the demographics before.” Eren didn't respond. “Well, military demographics. It must have been really egalitarian.”

She waited for Eren to say something, but he didn't. "I guess you must already know that, huh? Nowadays we're just starting to increase the number of women in the armed forces again. After the Walls fell, focus shifted to repopulation, so it made more sense for women to stay home..."

It was clear Eren was not interested. Hanji began to fidget with the hem of her shirt. It went quiet for a few more minutes, so much so that Eren was almost glad when Hanji tried to start a conversation again, even if he was in no mood for it.

"We also found someone without an arm. Well, we found a lot of people missing limbs, but this one showed signs of healing, which meant he survived for a while after losing it." This got Eren's attention. Hanji practically breathed a sigh of relief. "Can you imagine that? Having to relearn to balance on your gear after something like that. It really says something about the pressures on their society that someone would go through the trouble instead of just retiring."

Eren searched for the words, but couldn't piece together an explanation from his vocabulary. "Irwin," he said instead.

"Irwin!" Hanji was on her feet before Eren could blink. "Of course! What time is it over there?" She checked her watch. "Eh, he *might* be awake. Here, I'll call him right now. I'm sure he'd know what to do!"

She already had her phone in her hand when there was a knock on the door. Eren was suddenly on his feet too as the doctor came into the room.

"Levi?" he asked before the man in white could even open his mouth.

The doctor checked his clipboard. "Are you Eren Jaeger?" Eren nodded. The doctor smiled, shook his hand. "My name is Dr. Engel." He checked the board again. "And who are you?"

"Zoe Hanji," Hanji answered.

"Would you mind stepping out for a moment?" he said. "I need to speak to the family of the patient."

"No," Eren said before Hanji could even take a step. He wasn't sure he could even understand medical jargon in the modern language, but more than that he couldn't stand seeing the look on Hanji's face. "I want her to stay."

Much to his relief, the doctor smiled. "That'll be fine. Would you like to take a seat?"

Hanji did, reluctantly, and patted the chair next to her for Eren to do the same. In all honesty he would have preferred to stay standing, but it seemed as if everyone was waiting for him to sit. When he did, the doctor checked his clipboard one more time, sighed, and set it aside.

"What Levi experienced was a tonic-clonic seizure. Are either of you familiar with that term?"

Eren wasn't. He looked to Hanji.

“I might have heard it before somewhere,” she said.

“It was formerly known as a grand mal seizure.”

This Hanji understood. Eren still didn’t, but by Hanji’s reaction it was nothing good, and that was all he needed to know.

“Is Levi going to get better?” he interjected.

“The most common cause of these types of seizures is epilepsy, but adult-onset is rare,” the doctor explained. Eren barely caught any of it. “The other most likely cause is a brain tumor, which we can easily detect with a CT sca—”

“Is he going to get better?” he interrupted again when it became clear that this speech would not culminate into an answer he could understand. To his surprise, it was Hanji that shushed him with a hand on his arm.

“Did you find a tumor?” she asked.

Eren didn’t know that word either, but he could tell before the doctor even said anything that he would be delivering the worse of two answers. “We did.”

Hanji’s grip on Eren’s arm tightened. “Is it...”

“We won’t know if it’s cancerous until we biopsy, but I strongly recommend it be removed in either case. It can be done, although as with any surgery it is not without its risks. For the time being we have put him on a number of benzodiazepines to suppress further seizure activity. He’s awake now if you want to see him.”

The last part was all Eren understood and it was all he wanted to hear.

“Yes!” he blurted, already on his feet and slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

“First, do either of you have any more questions?” the doctor asked.

Eren couldn’t care less about anything else in the world right now, but Hanji was more level headed than that.

“Was there a way we could have known earlier?” she asked.

“It’s hard to say,” the doctor answered. “Tonic-clonic seizures sometimes have an aura phase of low-level simple partial seizures.”

“What are those?”

“It could present as anything from lightheadedness, to dizziness, to headache, to unusual or inappropriate emotions, feelings of personal doom, strong *déjà vu*, or even altered vision or hearing, among a number of other things. It varies widely by individual. Did Levi happen to mention any of these things?”

Hanji deflated. "I wouldn't know..."

Eren froze at the door. "*Déjà vu*," he repeated. Levi never got to tell him what it meant.

"Don't worry if you missed it," the doctor assured. "*Déjà vu* is extremely common and no cause for concern on its own."

Eren didn't want to mention the headaches. Missing one clue was enough for him, but moreover he wanted to get out of this horrible place.

"Levi?" he reminded the room.

"Of course," the doctor said. "Unless there are any more questions."

Eren wanted to kick something. To his utter relief, however, Hanji stood and shook her head. "No, thank you. Lead on." She smiled. It never reached her eyes.

It never failed to shock Eren how small this version of Levi looked. In reality he may have actually come up a little taller than the original, but where his corporal had been built like the trunk of a tree, this one had no muscle to speak of. If anything, he looked even smaller now.

"Eren," he said when he saw him. "Hanji." His speech was slow and a little slurred, but for once he pronounced both names as they should be. Eren couldn't be sure anymore if that was a good thing.

"We're here," Hanji said as she pulled a chair up to the bed. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," he said in the common tongue, and then in the modern variant added, "groggy."

"That's normal," Hanji told him. "It's just the medicine."

"I'm drugged, not an idiot," he replied gruffly, still in the modern language, "Speak like an adult." His tone was irritated, but at least he sounded like himself. Hanji was reassured, right up until he turned to Eren on his other side and broke into the common tongue.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked.

He had never spoken to Eren in his own language in public before. He had certainly always told Eren to use the modern tongue when there was company unless explicitly requested. Did using it now count as an explicit request?

"What did he say?" Hanji asked.

Eren looked between them, not sure who to answer first.

"You're in the hospital," he finally told Levi.

"I can tell that much, thank you," he snapped back.

Hanji cleared her throat to remind she was still present. “Should I leave you two alone?”

Before Eren could say anything, Levi turned to her. “Why?” he asked, suddenly in the modern language again.

Hanji raised an eyebrow and gestured to Eren. Levi turned to look. The expression on his face was one of legitimate surprise.

“How long have you been there?” he asked.

It was then, searching his eyes for some explanation, that Eren understood. It all made sense, how Levi could be Levi but still so distinctly different. He and the original had always been different people, and until recently Eren was sure he had accepted that. Briefly, he had hoped in vain that they could be one and the same, but he had been wrong. So very wrong. They *were* different people, different people who just happened to now be stuck in the same head.

And it was all Eren’s fault.

“He’s been there the whole time, Levi,” Hanji said quietly.

Eren sat very still and watched as Levi grimaced and pinched the bridge of his nose the same way he had been doing more and more since yesterday. It reminded him too much of Reiner, so much so that he was forced to look away.

“Maybe you should sleep,” Hanji suggested.

Levi managed a nod. Hanji stood and wordlessly motioned for Eren to come out with her. Eren picked up his backpack and followed, but not before pausing for one last look at the man in the hospital bed. He wanted to say something—something that could fix him, something to apologize—but the only words he could find were, “good night.”

Levi acknowledged them, but Eren didn’t know which Levi it was.

“Is he going to be okay?” he asked Hanji when the door closed.

“I don’t know,” she whispered as she turned to walk back to the waiting room. Coming from Hanji, it was the worst answer Eren could have imagined. Hanji was a creature of discovery; if she admitted to not knowing, she swore to find out in the same breath. Eren never thought he’d see the day she didn’t want to know the answer to something, and that scared him more than anything.

He had to jog to catch up. “Can the doctor fix him?”

“He’s going to try,” she promised.

“What happens if he can’t?”

Hanji stopped in the middle of the hall and turned to him. The hand that gripped his shoulder was a little too tight to be comforting.

“Don’t worry,” she said in a way that made it impossible not to, “we won’t let anyone take you away. Irwin is going to find us a way out of this. I’ll call him right now.”

Back in the waiting room, she did just that. Eren sat with Armin’s book in his lap and listened to her half of the conversation from around the corner. The book was flipped open to the account of the Battle for Humanity. There was one line he came back to time and again.

Humanity’s Strongest gave their lives to buy the time necessary for mankind’s victory.

It served as a reminder that Levi’s death was destined to be Eren’s fault in each iteration. At least the last time it had been for something. At least the last time he had died the way he lived.

“I think I’ll send him home with Moblit for the time being,” he heard Hanji say into the phone. “No, he’s okay, he’s just sitting there with his book again... Hard to say, but it’s definitely not good for him here... Yeah, I know... Me? No, I’m fine, really. I can stay... Come on, you know me better than that...” she chuckled dryly. “Okay, I get it. I’ll call him now. Talk to you soon.”

Eren didn’t wait to confirm that the conversation was done before he pushed himself to his feet and rounded the corner.

“I don’t want to leave,” he told Hanji.

She eyed the fist clenched at his side. “I’m sorry, Eren, but it’s for your own good.”

“I don’t want to leave,” he repeated through gritted teeth. “I want to stay with Levi.”

Hanji looked him up and down. She looked more exhausted than Eren could remember, and he had seen the original stay up three nights in a row before without ever losing steam. It was obvious in that moment that this version was a fake. Fake like Petra, fake like Erd and Aurou and Gunther, fake like the Levi willing to die peacefully in a bed. Eren *hated* this imposter. He hated them all.

“I’m sorry,” she said again and pushed a button on her phone. Eren could only stare as she brought it to her ear and turned away. When she spoke, her voice was completely different, full of humor and fake smiles. “Hey, Moblit! Do you know the way to the hospital?”

Eren couldn’t stay for the rest. He felt like his blood was about to reach a cold boil, and if he didn’t move it would be the end of him. Wordlessly he shoved Armin’s book back into his bag and slung it over one shoulder. He didn’t look back as he started down the other end of the hall and through the double doors to the stairwell. His feet carried him down and down and down.

No one at the front desk tried to stop him. The big doors slid out of his way as he drew close. Outside, the rain was a mockery of itself, nothing more than tiny droplets that felt like needles against Eren’s skin. He wanted a blizzard, he wanted thunder and lightning, he

wanted a chaos, but all he got was a fog. At least the rain here still smelled the same. He paused for a moment to take in a deep breath of it before he broke into a run.

Chapter End Notes

Do keep in mind that Eren (and even Levi to some extent) are unreliable narrators. Just because they come to a conclusion does not make it true. In fact, I've made sure that you can read everything about the story so far with the view that nothing supernatural is going on at all. Levi thought he remembered something, but did he really? Eren thinks he's two people in the same body, but how does Eren know? Even Levi speaking a language he supposedly barely knows could be explained away since we are talking about an issue with his brain. The explanations the characters give are far fetched to say the least, but the beauty is that *you don't have to accept them*.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

First things first: I added some notes to the end of chapter three. I *highly* recommend you go back and read them, as they may clear up a few things.

Secondly, my apologies for the delay on this one. Let me make my case with a few brief statistics:

Word count of chapters 1-3: 5,977 words

Word count of chapter 4: 8,608 words

Yeah.

I might have gotten a bit carried away, but I hope you'll find that there wasn't really a convenient place to stop in the midst of all the events. I do like this chapter better than the last one, and I hope you do too.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eren went where his instincts took him.

His thoughts were in chaos as much as his life was. He had felt alone here before, but all those times there had still been something for him to grasp at. He had Levi and Hanji and Irwin, and he had the special ops squad, and he had Armin's book. But Armin's book never changed, never gave advice, never told him what to do. He had it memorized practically cover to cover but in the end it was no use. The rest were just illusions. Their cities were different, their transport, their trees. Even the air and water tasted strange. It was like someone had plucked Eren out of the intricate web of bonds he called home and dropped him into a place wholly exotic. There was nothing for him here. Nothing to grab hold of. The world was so, so much bigger, and Eren had never felt so small.

Without realizing it, he had followed the one familiar path he knew. It was the same way Hanji had driven when they followed behind the ambulance, so within the hour he was passing in front of the lab. Despite the burning in his lungs, Eren didn't slow down. It was only when the train station came into view that he jogged to stop and doubled over to catch his breath. He checked behind his shoulder, but of course the hospital and the lab were both nowhere to be seen. A sea of umbrellas milled among the traffic.

This was the end of the line, Eren realized. There was nowhere left to run except by rail. It was that or turn around and go back, but what was back there for him? It was evident the run had done little to clear his head, because the only answers he could come up with tasted of acid.

Nothing. Lies. The facade of a friendship that ended two thousand years ago on battlefield in the snow. Eren still couldn't quite grasp such a span of time in his head. It was just a pity the train couldn't traverse it either. There was a whole new world out there for Eren, bright and shining and mysterious, and he didn't care for an inch of it if Mikasa and Armin weren't by his side to share it. The crowds were suddenly pushing at Eren from all directions. They were strangers, every one. Billions and billions of people, too many to count, and Eren didn't know one of them. Some had familiar faces, but none were real.

Well, all but one.

Eren burst through the train station doors and whirled around in search of a map. It was not hard to locate, plastered large and in plain view on the wall. He scanned the unfamiliar town names, looking for the one that rang a bell. His eye caught it right away. It was the biggest.

Berlin. Annie was at the University of Berlin. At least she had been the last time Eren had been able to visit her four months ago. There had been an awful lot of keys and cards and doors between her and the outside world, Eren remembered, but those were details he could figure out when he got there. Surely they would recognize him and let him in to see her again, he reasoned as he stood in line at the ticket counter.

He had only been able to see her the one time after the initial discovery. He didn't remember much of it, just that it felt like he was barely there ten minutes, although when he got outside again he was surprised to find that high noon had come and gone and the sun had set hours before. The room where they kept her was quiet and dim and very cold, not unlike her chamber back home. He had sat with her the same way there, too, able to look but never touch. Breaking the crystal would start decomposition, and that would mean that the last vestiges of Eren's home would decay from this world forever. He wouldn't allow it, not when he was not yet over how grossly unfair it was that he got to live when, no more than fifty years ago, Annie could have been alive with him.

The difference was all in their air canisters, Hanji had explained. Eren's weren't full but they Scouting Legion issue, bigger because they meant to actually be used. The air canisters 3D Maneuver Gear issued to the Military Police was smaller and only partially filled with gas to discourage its use except in emergencies, all in the name of reducing damage to the city buildings. Eren survived only because he could breathe a few years longer. If there was justice in that he could not find it.

"Next," the woman at the counter called. Eren stepped up to the window and rummaged around in his pockets. All he had on him was a €10 note and some coins. He pushed the money across to her.

"To Berlin," he said.

To woman raised an eyebrow at him. "Honey, you can't get to Berlin on €12.37."

"As close as possible," he insisted.

The woman pursed her lips and typed something into her computer.

“Let’s see...” she hummed. “I’m guessing this is one way?” Eren nodded. She punched a few more keys. “Okay, here we go. Student One-Way to Giessen will be €11.50. Does that sound okay?”

Eren had no idea where Giessen was, but he nodded anyway. The woman didn’t ask for a student ID, but Levi had said that as long as Eren looked the part most places didn’t. A moment later she handed Eren his ticket and change.

“Terminal 7,” she told him. “Next one’s in 8 minutes. Next!”

Eren mumbled a thank you and left. As promised, eight minutes later a train pulled up. Eren took one last look over the city, but any recognizable shapes were lost in the grey of drizzling rain. He felt like he should say goodbye yet had to remind himself that there was no one to say goodbye to. Not really. All of his friends were long gone.

The first sign of disappointment were the seats. They were plastic, and trains that went far always had padding. It was no surprise, therefore, that not forty minutes later Eren heard his stop announced over the intercom. He shouldered his backpack and trudged off to find another map. There was no rain here, at least, though the sky was still pretty murky. He had hoped, really hoped, that he was at least close to Berlin. Instead, he found that he was barely outside of Frankfurt. The €0.87 he had left wasn’t about to get him any closer.

There was nothing to do but readjust his backpack and move on. Waiting around the station wasn’t going to get him anywhere but into a panic, and he couldn’t let himself dwell on his situation too much. He had to get to Berlin; that was all that mattered.

It was the how that proved the hard part. Levi had always said that if he got lost, Eren should find a police officer and show them the card he was to carry with him at all times which listed his name, birthday, and address. The year of his birth was fake of course but the rest was accurate, right down to the French address. Eren didn’t want to go back to France, though, so going to the police was out of the question.

He turned the card over in his hands a few times and studied his own face printed on the fake, laminated plastic. Levi had insisted on making his hair lie flat for the photo. Eren hated it. It made him look like a copy of a copy of himself to match the rest of the world. At first he tried to snap the card in half, but when that failed he angrily pitched it into the gutter. Now there was no easy way back. Not anymore.

As he walked through the strange city, Eren tried to come up with a list of priorities. Food was first, though he hadn’t been a stranger to stealing it since he was ten. Next came a place to stay the night, preferably dry but he would settle for safe. He didn’t even know where to begin with that, but it was only late afternoon, so he had time to figure it out. Until then, he also had to keep in mind his third priority, which was money. He needed money to travel, and he needed to travel to get to Berlin. If it took half an hour by train just to make it this far, he’d never be able to walk to the whole way without provisions which, once again, required money. Mikasa had been decent at picking pockets when she wasn’t vehemently against it, but Eren had constantly gotten caught and that was when he wasn’t out of practice. He refused to resort to begging.

And yet, as the streetlights came on and the streets began to empty, Eren found all the things he had been looking for to be scarcer than he had anticipated. He found a bakery just as it was closing that reluctantly sold him a croissant for €0.50. He asked about lodging and was told of a few hostels in the area, but none that would take Eren in for free.

“You could try the Church of the Savior down the street,” the boy at the counter suggested.

Just the phrase was enough to turn Eren’s stomach. If he had thought the Wall Cult was bad in his day, the Church of the Savior was thousand times worse and ten thousand times more influential. He’d sworn from the minute the ideology was explained to him that he’d never set foot in one of their houses of worship. He took his bread, mumbled a thanks, and hurried out of the shop as fast as he could.

That night he slept in the park, or at least tried. It was cold but not yet freezing and he was lucky enough to have coat. The sharp branches of the bush or the pebbles digging into his back did not keep him from sleep so much as his own thoughts did. He had to remind himself that he had no regrets. The people that mattered were long gone and he was no more alone now than he had been last week or last month or last century.

The slowly brightening sky brought with it a light rain. Eren emerged from his hiding place sore like he hadn’t been since his first week of training. He waited out the drizzle under the cover of a nearby tree, knees pulled up and Armin’s book pressed to his chest. Today he would start walking, he decided. It was better than wasting his time sitting around. He could return to the train station, get a good look at the map, and then follow the tracks.

Life returned to the city right around the time the rain stopped. The way back to the station took Eren through a shopping district, at the fringe of which he found a local produce market just setting up shop for the day. One of the stands sold apples for 10 for €1, and Eren was able to haggle the woman into letting him have four for his remaining €0.37. They were bruised but tasted better than any apples Eren had ever had, and he had to force himself to save two for later despite the protest put up by his stomach.

Once at the station, Eren planned his route. If he followed the tracks north as far as Kassel, he could continue on straight west to Halle and from there northwest until he made it to Berlin. Judging by the scale, it would take two or three days by horse, but Eren was no good at making estimates like that for travel by foot. At this point, he had no choice anyway.

He tightened the straps on his backpack and started walking again. The nicer buildings at the center of town melted into warehouses, warehouses melted into sprawling monolith apartments, and soon the apartments melted into green expanses that made Eren ache for home. Every few minutes a train zipped past at impossible speeds. Eren realized too late that he should have bothered to check just how often they passed so he could keep time more easily, but as the hours trickled by the clouds parted and gave him the sun with which to mark the hours.

At first, the silence between the trains, filled only with wind and the rumble of a distant roadway, was a maddening torture. Eren had to keep looking down at his hands to remind himself that trying to transform would be of no use. He hadn’t managed it once since he had woken up to this strange new world, and his collection of scars, some fresher than others,

served as his reminder. Instead he staved off thoughts of helplessness by humming, and soon he was muttering half-remembered lyrics under his breath.

He started with the marching songs he had sung with the other trainees to keep in step while running laps. His voice grew louder and more confident as the words came back to him, and louder still as he bellowed to make up for one voice where there used to be dozens. Back then, nobody stood divided as friends or traitors. They had been comrades and they had been children, innocent and ignorant to the last.

When training songs ran out he switched to drinking songs, and when he could remember no more he sang the songs he knew from even further back; the tune with foreign words that Mikasa used to sing to him and Armin, the one she had picked up from her mother, when they were falling asleep in the work camp; the songs Armin's grandfather sang in a deep baritone to soothe the children at night, before he left for the war to be culled so others could eat; the songs Eren's own mother hummed as she stirred the pot or hung the laundry or scrubbed the dishes. It felt so unbelievably freeing to use his own language again, and in this ageless landscape it wasn't hard to feel like no time had passed at all. It filled him with such maddening joy to howl the words until his throat was hoarse. The words echoed back at him from the hills, and for a moment he could trick himself into believing it was old friends shouting back. Before long all the words grew incomprehensible, drowned in laughter and sobs in equal measure.

By the time buildings cropped up on the horizon the sun was completely overhead and Eren was more tired than he had any business being, yet somehow his body felt much lighter than it had before he started. He ate another of his apples as he approached the station. He had a feeling he knew which one it was, and looking at the map inside he found he was right; half the day and he'd barely covered half the distance he had on the forty minute ride from Frankfurt to Giessen. If he kept up this pace, it would take a week to walk to Berlin.

Furthermore, looking at the distance to the next stop, it was obvious he would need more than one apple. A good stock of provisions would be nice, and definitely something to carry water. Without a cent to his name, getting it all would be hard but not impossible. He just had to rely on some skills he'd picked up as a refugee. It would be easy, or so he thought.

Stalls on the street here sold flowers and shirts with MARBURG printed on them in large block letters, not bread or water or anything of any use. Eren wandered up and down the busier streets for a good hour trying to find an easy target, but ended with nothing to show for it. Finally, as a last resort, he wandered into an indoor shop whose windows were plastered with promises of discounts. As long as he was stealing, he would rather it be from a place that was less likely to lose much from it.

Trying not to attract much attention, Eren slunk among the isles. He grabbed two sacks of bagels and the first two liter bottle he could find and stuffed them into his bag, then snuck a peek around to make sure nobody had seen. The store was pretty packed and at first it looked like Eren was in the clear. Then, a pair of eyes not far off caught his attention. The smirk that accompanied them was shockingly familiar. Eren froze for a moment, but when the girl's face did not change after a few blinks he shouldered his backpack and wandered over to her.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

“Just the shittiest attempt at being sneaky I’ve ever seen,” Ymir replied. She couldn’t have been older than in her late teens. Unlike the others from the past that Eren had encountered so far, this Ymir was just as thin and dirty as he remembered. Eren didn’t doubt she was just an conniving, too.

He took a look around to make sure no one was listening. “Are you going to tell anyone?”

“I dunno,” she stuck her hands in her pockets. “It would be *pretty easy* to yell thief.”

“So why haven’t you?”

Ymir smirked again. “How much room you got in your bag?”

“Some,” Eren answered.

“Good,” she lowered her voice. “You sneak some stuff out for me and I’ll keep my mouth shut. Hell, I’m such a good person I’ll even show you how it’s done.”

Eren studied her face with suspicion. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” Ymir promised with palms in the air. “I’m on a budget, too. We got a deal or what?” When Eren hesitated, she added, “or I could start yelling.”

That settled that. “Okay, deal.”

Ymir wasted no time. She briefly pulled out Eren’s things to peel a stripped sticker off each of them before emptying her handbasket into his bag. The contents consisted of two bottles of wine, a few bars of chocolate, a packet of pre sliced cheese, a bag of crisps, a sack of grapes, and whole frozen cake. It barely fit.

“It wouldn’t be so suspiciously full if you ditched the textbook,” she told him.

Eren agreed but he wasn’t about to go anywhere without it, so he opted to just carry it in his hands. Ymir shot him a look like she thought he was nuts but didn’t comment.

“Alright,” she said when everything was hidden away. “Now follow me and try not to look guilty. And if you hear beeping, run.”

Luckily, there was no beeping. In fact, there was no anything. Eren tensed up, ready for someone to stop them, but no one so much as batted an eye. Three blocks from the shop, Ymir elbowed him in the side.

“Relax, will you? You’d look less obvious if you wore your criminal record pinned to your shirt.”

Eren forced himself to exhale and drop his shoulders.

“How did you know I had a criminal record?” he asked.

Ymir side-eyed him. “Cause good kids don’t rob Aldis.”

“Fair enough,” he said, at least relieved she didn’t know his *actual* criminal record. Readjusting his pack, he added, “Where are we going?”

“Not much further,” she replied.

She didn’t say anything more and Eren knew it would be useless to ask. Within twenty minutes he found out anyway when the two of them stopped in the middle of a small student apartment complex.

“Hey!” Ymir called into an open second story window. “Let me in!”

Eren shouldn’t have been as surprised as he was when Christa’s head popped out. She too looked somewhere in her teens, but unlike the last version of her Eren had seen, this one had all of her hair was hidden away under a headscarf.

“Who’s that?” she asked when she spotted Eren.

“No one,” Ymir replied. “He’s leaving in a sec. Are you gonna let me in or what?”

“Hang on.” Christa disappeared back inside and reappeared a moment later. “Catch,” she said as she dropped a ring of keys. Ymir snatched it from the air with a grin and let herself in. Eren followed along behind.

At the top of the stairs, she kicked in the door on the left with an announcement of, “honey, I’m home!”

The apartment was small, badly lit, and compared to what Eren was used to, utterly filthy. Most of the space was taken up by an expanded pull-out couch, and the rest by a hiking backpack and small suitcase in the corner. The whole place smelled vaguely of beer and mildew. Christa, who had been perched on the window sill, crawled over the lot of it to get to the door. Ymir set her own bag down, more than likely expecting a hug, but what she got was a punch to the arm.

“You didn’t take your money with you,” Christa informed her.

“It’s fine,” Ymir waved. “Five finger discount.”

Christa punched her again. Ymir laughed. Eren set his bag down with a thud and shuffled his feet. This was all very surreal, and nostalgic to the point of a physical ache.

“Sorry about that,” Christa said, flashing Eren her friendliest smile. “Ymir didn’t get you in any kind of trouble, did she?”

“Are you kidding me?” Ymir groaned before Eren could say anything. “I saved him from trouble.”

Christa’s eyes widened. “Oh no!” she gasped. “What did she make you do in exchange?”

Eren looked between the two of them. They jabbered awfully fast and their accents were difficult to understand. “I just carried some things,” he admitted.

Christa rounded on Ymir. “What did you get?” It sounded like an accusation.

Ymir hoisted up her backpack and shoved it into Christa’s arms with enough force to knock her back onto the mattress. “Exactly what you asked for,” she said. “Oh, and also some stuff to celebrate.”

With that she bent down and unzipped Eren’s pack. Christa heaved the other bag off her in time for Ymir to shove a bottle of wine into her hands.

“Celebrate what?” she asked as she studied the label. “We’re not even there yet.”

“We’re pretty damn close,” Ymir said as shoved the frozen cake into Christa’s lap.

“We’re couchsurfing to the Netherlands,” Christa explained to a very confused looking Eren. Ymir snorted. “*Netherlands*, Ymir. *Netherlands*.”

“Couchsurfing?” Eren asked.

“Is that not the word for it here?” Christa asked. “Well, we basically just stay with people who let us sleep on their couch. Tonight we’re staying with some students we met on Craigslist. We’ve been going like this for almost two months now. All the way from Ukraine, if you can believe it!”

“Is someone talking about me?” a man’s voice yelled from an adjacent room.

“No!” Ymir yelled back.

“I definitely heard someone mention me,” the voice said. A head poked out from around the doorway. Eren wasn’t sure if he was more surprised by the fact that it was Connie or the fact that he had long strands of matted hair pinned up like a bird’s nest.

“Is he staying too?” He pointed at Eren with the spatula in his hand.

“No,” Ymir said.

“Um,” Eren interjected.

“Look, you can if you want,” Connie shrugged. “If you can fit on the couch with these two, that is. I’m sure my other roommate won’t mind as long as you don’t touch her food. Just keep it down, okay?” He wiped his free hand on his pants and reached for Eren to shake it. “I’m Connor by the way.”

“And I’m Historia,” Christa chimed in while Eren shook Connie’s hand. Ymir rolled her eyes. “And you know Ymir. What’s your name?”

“Eren,” he answered.

“Well nice to meet you, Eren,” Christa said.

“Got anything to contribute to dinner?” Connie asked. “We’re making broke-ass college student stir fry. Anything goes, really.”

“Here.” Ymir held out the bottle Eren had snatched up without looking. It was filled with some kind of soda, though he had intended to empty it out anyway and fill it with water.

Connie nearly fell over reaching across the sofa for it. “You want me to throw this in?”

“Genius, this one,” Ymir whispered to Eren.

“I heard that!”

“This too!” Christa called before tossing a package of frozen chicken and a couple of bell peppers Connie’s way. He caught the chicken only to drop it again, which was all fine since he had to stoop to pick the bell peppers up anyway.

“Fancy,” he whistled as he inspected the meat.

Eren sniffed the air. “Is something burning?”

Connie swore and vanished as suddenly as he had come while Ymir doubled over in hysterics.

“It’s not even that funny,” Christa told her.

Luckily, the food was not too badly burnt. Eren would have gladly eaten it in any case. He couldn’t even remember his last warm meal, so he shoveled the food into his mouth so fast he didn’t have time to identify all the components, much less judge the taste. To his credit, the others shared his lack of table manners. No one spoke until the plates were nearly empty.

“Been on the road a while, I see,” Ymir said when she looked up to see that Eren was the first one done.

He nodded his head before remembering that Christa had said she and Ymir had been going for almost two months.

“Where is it you’re headed?” Connie asked.

“Berlin,” Eren answered immediately.

“Why Berlin, if you don’t mind us asking?” Christa chimed in.

“I’m uh,” Eren pushed a burnt onion around his plate with the edge of his fork. “Visiting an old friend.”

Ymir chuckled. “Right.”

“What?” Eren asked.

“Well,” Ymir straightened up and pointed her fork at him. “Your clothes are so filthy you look like you’ve been sleeping outside, but your jacket is new and looks pretty quality, so obviously you’re a recent runaway. But you didn’t plan for it, ‘cause you didn’t have spare clothes or nothin’, just that book. I’ll believe you that you’re going to Berlin, but visiting? An old friend? No way.”

“Ymir!” Christa hissed. “Sorry about that,” she said to Eren. “We won’t pry. We know the rules of the road: you don’t ask for details.”

“You never said why you two were headed to the Netherlands,” Connie pointed out with his mouth full.

“Were you even listening to what she just said?” Ymir asked.

“It’s fine,” Christa said. “I don’t think it should be a secret.” She was suddenly trying to fight back a smile so hard her face was going red.

For once, Ymir didn’t say anything either. If Eren looked carefully, he could see the red creeping up on her dark cheeks, too. She waved for Christa to say it.

Christa cleared her throat. “Well,” she looked to Ymir. Ymir gestured to her again. “We’re going there to get married.”

Connie choked and started coughing. Ymir thumped him on the back so hard Eren felt it.

“Why are you going all the way to the Netherlands?” he asked while Connie alternated between coughing and clearing his throat.

“It’s the closest place, believe it or not,” Christa explained.

“People can’t get married in Ukraine?” Eren asked.

“Oh, *people* can,” Ymir answered. “Us queers can’t.”

He wasn’t sure he understood her correctly. “Why not?”

“An excellent question!” Ymir threw her hands in the air.

“Religion, I think,” Christa ventured.

“Bullshit,” Ymir spat back. “Ignorant fucks is why. One line in the Gospels about how our precious Savior was uncomfortable that one of his buddies had a massive boner for him, and somehow we’re supposed to take that to mean no one is allowed to be gay ever. ‘Cause, you know, we’re supposed to take advice from a guy who, with all his alleged omnipotence, goes through the trouble of turning into a hundred meter meat tree so he can kick a hole through the Walls instead of just fucking dissolving them from the get-go, because yeah, that’s fucking logical.”

“*Ymir*,” Christa slammed her hands on the table. “Some people actually believe in that! It’s a metaphor.”

“I got two metaphors right here,” Ymir growled, but all Eren saw were her two middle fingers.

“Well,” Connie cleared his throat and pushed back his chair. “I think that’s my cue to go write my History essay, don’t you think?”

“Good luck!” Christa called after him once he’d dumped his dishes in the sink.

“Wait,” Eren said suddenly. Connie paused in the doorway and looked back. Ymir and Christa were looking, too. Eren swallowed. He promised himself he would ask this question of everyone he recognized, no matter how unlikely. Strange a question as it was, it was the one thing only someone from back home could answer.

He recited the words and for a moment let himself hope that the silence that followed could mean something.

“Gesundheit,” Ymir said.

“Huh?” Connie grunted.

“What language was that?” Christa asked.

Despite expecting nothing less, Eren still felt a little disappointed. “Nevermind,” he said.

“Whatever,” Connie waved. “Night everyone.”

When the door closed behind him, a heavy silence hung over the table. Ymir slumped in her seat.

“I’ll get the wine,” she grumbled.

“Again, sorry about her,” Christa said to Eren once she had stepped out. “You’re not religious, are you?”

“No way,” he answered through gritted teeth.

“Good,” she sighed. “I mean, it’s fine if you were! There’s nothing wrong with—”

Ymir interrupted her by slamming a bottle down in front of her face.

“Drink,” she ordered as she dropped herself back onto her stool and screwed off the top of her own. Christa didn’t even touch hers while she and Eren watched Ymir down a good quarter of the bottle before coming up for air.

“To us,” she snarled, and passed the bottle on to Christa.

Christa sniffed it, wrinkled her nose, and took an experimental sip. As she began to lower it, Ymir reached over and tipped the bottle up, sloshing the wine down Christa’s chin and leaving her sputtering.

This time, Eren tuned out their arguing. There was a small, dirty window in the room from which he could just barely see the street. It was starting to get dark outside. Despite having somewhere to sleep tonight, Eren was suddenly struck with a wave of homesickness. The strength of it baffled him, because for once it was not his real home that he longed for, but for the home Levi had made for him in this world. Eren had to wonder if he was even still alive, but as soon as he caught himself thinking about it he did everything in his power to force the thought away. He didn't want to think about how wrong it had been of him to run. He tried not to regret it, but despite his best efforts, a part of him—a fairly large part even—did. But there was no turning back. It was not a friend he had deserted, Eren had to remind himself, but a stranger in a familiar mask. That was all. He just couldn't bear to see that mask die twice.

Christa was offering him the now more than half empty wine bottle. Eren hadn't planned to take it but he found himself accepting it anyway and downing the rest of what could easily have been mistaken vodka watered down with piss. It took a minute for the effects to kick in, but by the time they did Eren's homesickness had drifted to the back of his mind.

He zoned out again as Ymir set to describing hers and Christa's ideal future. His gaze fell back to the window and street, but this time there was something entirely unexpected standing beneath the streetlight outside. Eren rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming. He wasn't.

It was a horse. Sure there was a man on it, but what did that matter? A horse. A real horse to get him to Berlin.

Christa lifted herself up out of her seat to get a look at what Eren was staring at so intently.

"What is it?" Ymir asked.

"Wow," Christa exclaimed. "There's a mounted officer outside!"

Eren was already on the move. He grabbed the two liter bottle and, much to Ymir's protest, dumped the remains of the soda in the sink before cramming the opening under the tap and cranking the cold water to full blast.

"Is he leaving?" he asked Christa.

"No." She craned her neck. "It looks like he's texting."

The bottle wouldn't fill fast enough.

"What's the hurry?" Ymir slurred against the lip of the second wine bottle. "He's not going to look for you here."

Eren couldn't even piece together how to say that there was no time to explain. Bottle now full, he stumbled into the other room where his book and bookbag were, hurriedly emptied out all of Ymir's groceries, and slung the bag on his back. Then he was out the door and scuttling down the stairs without so much as a goodbye. There was no need to stay here tonight, not when he could be halfway to Berlin by morning.

Dismounting the officer would be easy; he'd done it to Jean a thousand times before. It was all a matter of scaring the horse so it reared. When the rider falls, you grab the reins and look smug. Nothing could be simpler, Eren reminded himself as he snuck through the alley toward the pair. Neither had noticed him, but for some reason Eren still felt like his chest was full of feathers. Perhaps it was just excitement.

There was a metal trashcan not far from where the horse and officer stood. Eren wedged himself between it and the wall and kicked. It fell with a loud clatter. The officer visibly jumped and dropped his phone, but his horse barely flicked its ear.

“What the hell?” The man rounded him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Eren hesitated for just a second too long. He should run now, before he lost his chance, before he was dragged kicking and screaming back to France, but his mind snagged on disbelief. First Ymir, then Christa, then Connie, and now... the coincidences today were too much.

Jean slid off his horse and picked up his phone. “Hey,” he barked. “Did you hear me? I said what do you think you’re doing?”

Eren looked back up to the apartment, but every window looked the same. His instinct was to bolt, but he needed that horse. His eyes darted to the reins. Jean was too busy checking his phone for cracks to notice. He must have been in his mid thirties or so. His hair carried some streaks of grey and he had finally managed to grow a proper goatee.

Just as Eren readied himself to make a swipe for reins, he looked up. Eren blinked. Jean squinted at him.

“You look familiar,” he said, and Eren could have sworn he felt the ground move beneath him.

Without taking his eyes off the boy, Jean turned his head toward the radio on his shoulder. “Anyone on the north side got a car?” he asked.

There was a hiss of static and then a voice. “I’m over by the town hall. What’s the situation?”

“10-91,” Jean answered. “Corner of Merville and Whitney. 10-18.”

“10-4,” the voice answered, and the static cut off.

Eren couldn’t find his voice to ask the question. He wasn’t even sure if he needed to. Jean had practically admitted he knew him. Eren’s knees felt weak. Had he been asked back home who of all people he would rather be stranded with, Jean would not have been his top choice, but faced with the reality now, Eren found himself revoltingly giddy at the thought.

“You remember me?” he stammered.

“Uh,” the question seemed to confuse him. “Just... just stay put a minute.” He saw Eren’s eyes dart to the horse again. “If you promise not to run away, I’ll let you pet him.”

Eren edged toward the horse. Jean was holding its reins now, but Eren was confident he wouldn't be able to hold on to them for long. But that was *if* he still wanted to run. Someone actually *remembering* changed things, but it seemed Eren didn't have long to decide just how much.

"I'll hold him," Jean continued. "He won't bite."

Eren didn't think, he just blurted. The familiar words of his question fell from his mouth like rain.

Jean raised a brow at him. "Sorry," he said. "I don't, uh... *nyet ponimayu* Russian, understand?"

It was Eren's turn to be completely baffled, but as he searched for a response sirens rose up in the distance. Within a matter of seconds, a police car stopped by the curb right beside where Eren and Jean were standing. Marco Bott, no more than five years older than he ever got the chance to be, leaned out the driver's window.

"John!" he called. "I thought that sounded like you! What's the situation?"

Jean stepped up to his window, leading the horse with him. "Don't move," he told Eren before turning away. When he spoke to Marco, he lowered his voice enough that Eren didn't catch what he said. Then, he ducked his head inside the car window. Eren edged sideways to see what was going on.

There was a laptop attached to the dashboard of the car, and the screen was filled with pictures of people next to blocks of text. Marco clicked on one, and suddenly the picture of Eren with his hair slicked down filled half the screen. The words MISSING were printed underneath.

Jean looked back at him, then back to the picture, then back to the boy again. "Eren, right?"

Eren wasn't sure if he should nod or run or make a grab for the horse. His indecision left him frozen like a deer. One thing was certain: Jean didn't remember him at all.

"We're not going arrest you, Eren," he went on, lifting his hands where Eren could see them. His voice was slow and steady, like he was talking down a cornered dog. "We just need you to come with us so we can ask you some questions and make sure you're safe. We won't even ___"

Eren didn't stick around to let him finish. The alley was too blocked off by the car for him to make off with the horse quickly enough, but he certainly wasn't going to let the police take him anywhere. His only choice was to set off at a sprint down the way he had come. Jean shouted something behind him, but Eren didn't stop to listen. He didn't even have time to stop to test the door to Connie's place. All he could do was run as fast as his legs would take him and make the first turn he could to break the officers' line of sight.

The flaw in his plan was, of course, that he was on foot. It didn't take long for the sound of hooves to come up behind him. Eren didn't look back and willed himself faster. He could see

the end of the alley up ahead. Jean was shouting for him to stop, but the blood pounding in his ears was louder. The hooves were closer now, almost upon him. Eren let out one final burst of speed. Just as he neared the exit, a police car pulled up to block his way.

He skidded to a halt and looked back. No, a waste of time. He could get around the car easier than he could around the horse, yet looking back he saw Marco stepping out of the vehicle to obstruct his way further. Back to Jean again, making the mistake of dismounting. It was the only opening he was likely going to get.

Eren swung his leg with practiced precision. Annie would be proud if it wasn't for the fact that Jean was easier to take down in three hits here than he had been when they were twelve. It only took a second, but it was a second too long. As Eren made a leap for the horse, Marco caught him by the handle of his backpack. Had Eren shrugged the pack off he might have made it, but even running on pure instinct he refused to leave the only piece of home he had. One moment he was pitching backwards, the next his face was being pressed into the pavement and his hands wrenched behind his back.

"That falls under assaulting an officer," Marco told him as something cold and metallic tightened around Eren's wrists. "Sorry, but now you *have* to come with us."

Eren tried to struggle, but it was no use. He couldn't win against two, not with his hands bound and while on foot. Even if he could, it would mean leaving his backpack behind. He even tried to bite the hand that forced his head down into the vehicle, but that too proved beyond him. The sound of the door locking behind him was like the final nail in his coffin.

He only said one thing the entire ride to the station, and it was to ask Marco The Question. He did not expect an answer, and he hardly got one. Marco only reminded him of his right to keep silent and nothing more.

Eren resolved to milk that right for all it had. Mikasa had been right; the world was cruel, and these people were not his friends no matter how much they looked like them. Off in the west the sun lay bleeding on the horizon. Berlin was just beyond, but the odds of getting there died with the last clots of sunlight.

But just as life was wretched and unfair, Mikasa had also believed it beautiful. Eren had come a hundred kilometers, was prepared to go five hundred more, just to lay his eyes on the corpse of a girl he once knew. And so what a gift it was to be ushered into the police station and down the corridor, past a door that read

CORONER
A. Leonhardt

Eren dug his heels into the floor. The coincidences haunting his day swirled into a pattern. Without Christa, Ymir would not have been in the shop. Without Connie, neither would even be in the city. Without Ymir, Eren would never have seen Jean. Without Jean, he would never have waited for Marco. Without Marco, he would never be here. It all lead to this, he was certain of it.

"Come on," Marco urged. "Don't stop."

With one final miracle, the door opened. A woman stepped out. Her blonde hair, laced with silver, was pinned in a neat bun on the top of her head. In her hand was a white mug with a picture of a winged horse prancing along its exterior. Deep folds were etched into her skin with years of lost sleep, but the eyes beneath—the eyes Eren had spent three years willing open—were as blue and piercing as the last time they had been fixed on him like this.

“Annie,” he breathed.

Marco pressed him forward. Eren stumbled past. The blue eyes watched, first wide, then narrow.

“Wait,” she said. It was no longer a girl’s voice, but it rang familiar. Marco stopped.

“What is it?” he asked.

Annie ignored him. “No one’s called me that since I was a kid,” she went on. Her eyes narrowed more until they were knives slipping under Eren’s skin. “Do I know you?”

Eren countered with his own question. The one he was slowly becoming certain that no one in this world could answer.

“Are we prey?” he asked in the common tongue.

The silence hung heavy like his dirge, but had Eren not grown practiced at reading his sparring partner’s expressions, he would have missed the parade of emotion the flashed across her features in the blink of an eye. She opened her mouth and Eren braced for her to be the final stake in his heart. In the second it took her to make a sound, he nearly regretted asking in the first place.

And then she answered.

“...No.” Her mouth hung ever so slightly open, like she meant to say more. She looked Eren up and down, and he held his breath as she studied his face as if the rest of the answer would be written there. He wasn’t sure if he could breathe if he wanted to. He would let this woman tear him apart alive if the next words out of her mouth would be...

“Stay away from me,” she growled. She turned heel. She walked away.

Eren would have stayed frozen on the spot forever if Marco had not shoved him forward. He stumbled and caught himself. It was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. When he sat silent in the interview room, it was not out of spite as he had planned but out of shock. They took his picture, made him blow into a tube, tried to ask him questions, but Eren said not a word. He felt like the air had just gone out of him.

She knew. Annie knew and she didn’t want anything to do with him. Fifty years the original had been dead. That woman in the hall could easily have been fifty herself. She was the first Annie in two thousand years and she wanted nothing to do with him to the point of loathing. Eren suddenly didn’t see the point in going to Berlin anymore.

They gave him a paper sign and used words Eren didn't know to explain what it was. In the end it turned out they wanted him to give them permission to tell whoever it was that reported him missing where he was. If he didn't sign, the filer would just be told that he was safe and his case dismissed. There was no dragging him home. There were no threats.

Eren stared at the pen for a long, long time. What difference did it make, he asked himself. What was the point?

As if sensing the question, Marco cleared his throat.

"If you let them know where you are, they might come get you," he said, seemingly to the ceiling. "You'll have to lock you up overnight for the assault thing, but bail is going to be set right away, so it wouldn't be too bad to have someone here to pay that for you, right?"

Eren pushed the paper away from himself just to spite him. The droop in Marco's shoulder wasn't nearly as satisfying as he had hoped.

They put him in a room behind bars. The only other person there was an old man that smelled like booze and urine who snored in the corner. When it was just him and the old man, Eren sat in the as far away from him as the cell would allow, pulled his knees to his chest, and hung his head. They hadn't even allowed him to keep Armin's book to keep him company.

An hour ticked by, maybe two. There was no way to tell. Eren didn't feel like singing. The tune had gone out of the world, corroded away by the tides of time. What had once been a mighty mountain for Eren to stand upon was just a pebble at the bottom of a river, and try as he might he could no more cling to it than he could bring back its splendor from days long carried away in the current. It was not the world that did not belong to him, but he who did not belong to the world; the surroundings were not strange, but he the stranger.

A door creaked, and through it footsteps. They strode deliberately across the room and the bars of the cell gave a clank as two hands wrapped around them.

"Hey," Jean said. "Wake up."

Eren didn't lift his head. There was a jingle of keys and then a rattle as they were deliberately shaken. At this, Eren glared up at the officer from behind his hair.

"Yeah, you. Eren Jaeger." The tumblers in the door gave a loud clank as the door unbolted. "You're free to go."

At first Eren thought it was some kind of joke, but even something like this was a little cruel for Jean. He stood in the doorway, holding the door and tapping his foot impatiently.

"Come on, I don't have all night," he groaned. "Bail's paid. Get out."

Still feeling like something was amiss, Eren slowly got to his feet. Jean made no move to slam the door in his face, but he did motion for Eren to hurry up. Only when he was past the threshold did he swing the door shut behind him.

“Now let’s pick up the pace a little,” he growled. “I’d rather get this over with sometime before next week.”

With that he herded Eren along down a different hallway than the one before. Eren was too proud to ask where they were going. His backpack and jacket were given back to him, and Jean gestured that he was free to go through the final door alone.

It lead to a lobby. At this hour, there was only person there. She had traded in her white labcoat for a green one, and now stood in the middle of the room with a handbag under her arm. If Eren didn’t know better, it was like she was waiting.

There was no way to slip past unnoticed, not that it mattered; her eyes were on him from the second he pushed open the door. Despite being sure in himself that there was nothing more he could say, he held her gaze with will mustered from hope that by all rights had no business existing.

The door behind him hissed shut, and still neither said anything. The lights buzzed and the clock on the wall ticked. Sixty-three billion seconds, give or take two hundred million.

“I figured a runaway like you with no money wouldn’t have a place to stay,” she said at last. The words seemed to pool at their feet instead of vanishing as they should. “My sofa is no jail cell, but you’re welcome to it if—” She silenced Eren’s open mouth with a finger. “If you tell me who you are.”

Eren waited for her to say more until he realized she was waiting for an answer.

“I...” his voice cracked. “I thought you wanted nothing to do with me.”

Annie shrugged the way she did whenever Eren managed to pin her in the training yard. “Curiosity killed the cat,” she said. The silence preyed on them a moment longer before she added, “will you come?”

Eren nodded cautiously at first, and then with more confidence. As Annie lead the way out, it dawned on him how much easier it was for her to steal him this time around.

This time, of course, he came more than willingly.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't originally plan to include this many characters, but a lot of you asked for the 104th so I did my best. More to come, maybe??

I hope you enjoyed it anyway, and as always let me know what you thought! It may be a little while longer before I can even begin on the next chapter what with term papers to write and such, but believe you me nothing will get me back on the horse faster than knowing there are people getting a kick out of my work.

Also! If you made an art please link me to it because I want to shower it with love and also put it at the end of the appropriate chapter. Or just tag it with #2u2k if it's on tumblr

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your immense support through my semester-long hiatus. I promised myself I would get the new chapter out before Christmas, but after reading over what I had I realized it would be better off split into parts, so you get an update earlier than planned! Hurray!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eren had never quite gotten used to the feel of riding in horseless carriages. Their rumble was entirely alien, and the way they moved completely unpredictable. And yet, it was not for want of horses that people turned to them as he might have initially thought; he had once seen two perfectly good steeds towed in their own little carriage right behind the motorized sort. His next guess would have been the cost of keeping horses had not the price of the reeking, iridescent dark ooze used to the run the alternative been the first complaint off any adult's lips whenever the issue came up. Past that, Eren had no idea what the upside of one could be.

Annie, her knuckles unusually pale against the steering wheel, did not seem to be the right person to ask. Her lips had remained pressed in an unreadable line since the two of them had stepped out into the night. It was hard to gauge her expression when the only light in the car was the occasional brush of streetlight, but Eren never took his eyes off her none the less. Not once did she look back.

Only when the car gave one final jolt of acceleration and merged into the freeway did she make any indication that she even knew Eren was there.

“How is it you know me?” she asked stiffly.

Eren waited for her to look at him but she did not. “You don’t remember?”

Her eyes flickered to him, but only briefly. It could have just as easily been a trick of the light.

“I haven’t gone by Annie since before you were born,” she told him. “Who are you?”

It was an easy mistake to make on her part, but not a reassuring one.

“You don’t know?”

Annie’s brow furrowed the way it always did when someone was wasting her time.

“Back there,” Eren continued. “You knew the answer.” She didn’t reply. Eren swallowed. “You knew it, didn’t you?”

Annie’s eyes were fixed fiercely ahead. At first it seemed she might not answer.

“I knew,” she agreed at long last. “But I couldn’t tell you how.”

Eren tangled his fingers in his lap and waited for her to say more. She never did.

Annie’s apartment was on the second floor of a row of townhouses. As soon as she fit the key into the lock, a great ruckus of frantic thudding suddenly exploded from the other side. Eren found himself taking a step back, but Annie looked completely unmoved.

“Wait here,” she told him.

Eren nodded and watched her crack open the door just wide enough to wedge her foot inside. The noise intensified, and after a moment Annie slipped inside through the narrowest of openings.

“Hush,” Eren heard her say. The sounds stopped immediately, after which the woman’s voice came again. “You can come in now.”

Eren edged toward the door and cautiously peeked inside. It was difficult to tell from the doorway how big the place was, but if Eren had to guess it was no bigger than Levi’s. It would have been just as tidy, too, were it not for the stacks of cardboard boxes piled up along the walls. Annie had set her handbag down on one such stack, as she needed both hands to restrain a large white dog.

“Hurry up,” Annie urged. “I can’t hold him all day.”

The beast was nearly as big as she was, or at least it felt that way. Eren couldn’t tell if its fur was bristling or just short. He’d seen his fair share of stray dogs in Shiganshina, but he had always known better than to get too close.

“He doesn’t bite,” Annie assured him. It was of little comfort. Eren closed the door and pressed himself against it.

“Are you afraid?” she asked.

Stupid, brave, or unwilling to admit weakness, Eren shook his head.

“Good,” Annie said. “I’m going to let him sniff you.” And with that, she let go of the dog’s collar.

The hound charged forward. Eren squeezed his eyes shut. He held his breath. He waited. When no pain or disembowelment followed, he allowed himself to crack open one eye to find the dog sniffing at his backpack. He didn’t dare move to stop it; the most he could do was look to Annie for help.

Annie patted her thigh. "That's enough, Warrior. Leave him alone."

On cue, the beast retreated. Eren slumped.

"Like I said," Annie continued as she slipped out of her shoes and slid them neatly against the wall. "He doesn't bite."

The dog milled around Annie's feet while continuing to shoot glances at Eren now and again as the boy followed Annie's example of placing his shoes against the wall. Still, as ordered, it didn't approach again. Then both followed Annie deeper into the apartment. The living room was just as cluttered with boxes as the entryway, some of them labeled with years or names Eren didn't recognize.

"Excuse the mess," Annie told him when she noticed his staring. "My father just passed. I'm still sorting through his things." Immediately, Eren averted his gaze elsewhere, away from the boxes. The only place free of them was the top a tall bookshelf in the corner. There, on the highest point in the room, sat the biggest cat Eren had ever seen. It watched him with angry, reflective green eyes.

"Bigby *will* bite," Annie commented, startling Eren out of the staring contest he had inadvertently fallen into. "Just don't touch him. He'll keep to himself. Anyway, there's the sofa you'll be sleeping on," she continued with a wave of her hand. "You can set your things down there." With that she disappeared into the next room, the dog at her heels. Eren dropped his backpack and coat and jogged to keep up. His heart was hammering, and his palms slick. He half couldn't believe that he was really here—that *she* was really here.

Through the doorway was the kitchen, and of course more boxes. Annie was in the process of clearing them off the table in the center. When Eren rushed to help, she responded with a dry smile.

"Are you hungry?" she asked when the last box was pushed into the corner. "I have at least four choices of casserole. I can't possibly eat it all myself."

Although Eren couldn't be sure how long it had been since he had dinner with Connie, Ymir, and Christa, he wasn't the least bit hungry. If anything, his stomach was all in knots. Annie had always seemed to have that effect on him. It was like she always knew exactly what she wanted of him but refused to say, and for reasons Eren could never place he was willing to go to the ends of the earth to find out.

He shook his head. There was no way he could eat at a time like this.

"Me neither," Annie shrugged. "Just tea then. But first, you're going to shower." She pointed to the door opposite the one they had come in, in a manner that left no room for argument. "First door on your left. Use the purple towel."

He went, though half reluctantly. Two thousand years ago, bathing had been a weekly affair for him, and that was under Levi's more than strict standards. He detested it—had always detested it—but over the past several months he had grown so used to bathing daily that the two days he had now gone without had left him feeling like there was a layer of grime

clinging to him. That, and having hot water one didn't have to boil themselves was always a plus.

He showered as quickly as he could manage, finding himself too modest to spend any more time than needed nude anywhere in Annie's vicinity, no matter the locked door. She had always seemed the sort of girl who wouldn't hesitate to castrate someone who so much as looked at her the wrong way, and Eren wasn't about to risk it. Plus, the sooner he finished, the sooner they could talk.

As he was drying off, there came from the other room the whistle and click of the front door opening and closing. Perplexed, Eren pulled his dirty clothes back as quickly and possible, cracked the door, and peeked out. The hall was empty, but as he wandered through the kitchen and into the living room, a painting leaning against the wall caught his eye that he hadn't noticed before. He's seen it elsewhere, in churches. It had not been this particular one, he thought, but he had seen plenty of versions, each a little different. The overall details were always the same, though.

Most of the work was dominated by a single, male figure. Whenever Eren asked about it, people had insisted he was meant to be the Savior. The first time Eren heard this, he had laughed aloud. They got his height right, but the similarities stopped there. His hair was too long, his skin too pale, his nose too small. He stood in the frame of the device that had been invented precisely for the purpose of his execution, a contraption called a guillotine. Along the top were carved his last words: *the cycle will not end until the last of us dies*. The machine had allegedly been designed expressly for the clean cutting out the nape of the neck. In the years since, Levi had said, it was used to execute thousands suspected of being titans in secret. None of them were, of course, he had gone on to say, because that was impossible. When Eren had tried to correct him, he had refused to entertain the topic further.

On either side of the alleged Savior were a man and a woman. Although their proportions were those of adults, they were dwarfed by the central figure's size. Some said they were his disciples, others that they were Adam and Eve, and more still that said they simply represented mankind. Their appearances were so changed, it took Eren months to make the connection as to who they really were. Both were blond, perfect to the ideal, and nude save for the occasional modestly placed leaf, wisp of fabric, or lock of hair. The man had one eye closed; the woman had two.

That Annie was religious enough to own such a thing was both surprising and offputting.

"A fan of the arts?" she asked. Eren jumped. He had neither even seen or heard her come in. Her cheeks were flushed with cold and she held a dog leash in one hand. The dog itself was nowhere to be seen.

For some reason, Eren felt like he was caught doing something he shouldn't have been. Hurriedly, he shook his head.

"Pity," she shrugged. "Come on then. Kettle's probably boiled."

And so it had. She poured the tea mostly in silence, asking only how Eren took it and telling him to have a seat. When it was ready, she set Eren's cup down in front of him and retreated

back to the counter where she remained with her own cup, which he noticed she took black. She swirled the liquid around, saying nothing, for so long that Eren thought they would be drinking their tea in silence.

It surprised him when she finally spoke. "Alright, talk."

He fiddled with the tea bag string as he struggled to find a starting point. He needed something easy to swallow, though unfortunately none of it was.

"Promise you'll believe me," he began instead.

The answer was immediate. "No."

He should have expected that. It was stupid of him to even ask. "Then promise you'll listen at least."

Annie sighed, pushed herself off the counter, and pulled out a chair to sit across from him. The buzz of the overhead light was the only sound in the apartment. "Alright," she said. "I promise."

Eren swallowed. "Do you know... Adam?"

"From the news?" Annie asked. He nodded. "I've heard of him, obviously. What about him?"

Eren turned the cup around and around in his hands, looking anywhere but at Annie. "What do you know?"

Annie leaned back to fish a spoon from the nearest drawer. "I know he's awake," she said as pressed her teabag to the side of her mug and squeezed the life out of it. "Supposedly. A lot of hearsay. A lot of media blackout."

"What else?"

She lay her teabag and the spoon rest on the saucer in the middle of the table and sighed. "A lot of big researchers are apparently staking their careers on his existence despite all the talk of him being a hoax. Caused quite a flurry when the Church publicly denounced him as a liar."

Eren's lip curled. Annie didn't fail to notice.

"Not a fan of the Chruch either?"

Eren's eyes darted immediately to the doorway. He could just see the painting out in the livingroom.

"Neither am I, to be honest," Annie went on, much to Eren's surprise. "It's my father's. Don't get me wrong, I used to be just as religious as he was when I was younger, but part of growing up is realizing that parents don't always know best."

She stopped and watched Eren in a way that made him feel like she was piecing apart his organs with her eyes. Unsure of what to add, he took her spoon and mirrored her motions of removing the teabag from earlier. When he looked up again, Annie had switched to watching the painting.

“Have you ever wondered why that same iconography is painted over and over and over again?” she said just as Eren put the mug to his lips. It was too hot but he tried to drink it anyway and ended up sputtering. Annie hadn’t been interested in waiting for his answer anyway. “It’s because people see in it what they want. Centuries of churchmen see the only woman in the painting has her eyes closed. Hitler saw that the avatars of the human race were both blond. Isn’t it funny how it always seems to be about oppression when the central message of the faith seems so pure. What was it again? ‘Humanity should not limit themselves with walls but expand ever outward past arbitrary limits we set ourselves?’ Something along those lines. And to remind us when we had forgotten, God sent his son to knock down the walls that kept us back.” She paused to take a drink. “Yet even back then, it was all just propaganda to drive the population away from the Crown’s control. There was never a noble goal, not even at the heart of it, just power and profit.” At last, her gaze darted back to Eren. “The Church’s take on the truth is worth as much as anyone else’s.”

Eren’s jaw hung slack as he listened. For all his vitriol over who the world had chosen to venerate, he had never stopped to consider why. Annie had always had a talent for turning everything on its head and leaving everyone around her speechless.

“But anyway,” she continued when it became clear he had nothing to say in return. “Adam. Go on. What about him?”

It took a great effort for Eren to pull himself back to the issue at hand. The knots in his stomach were suddenly back and cold as ice. His chest felt tight as he sorted out the right words. Trouble was, there didn’t seem to be any.

“You’re sure you don’t... remember anything?” he tried.

Annie frowned at him. “Is this going somewhere?”

“Do you?” Eren’s voice shook. He couldn’t help but shift in his seat.

“There isn’t much published as of yet —”

“No, no,” Eren interrupted. “Do you remember... Eden!”

“There’s no need to raise your voice,” Annie told him as she took her cup in her hands. “I studied it in primary school like everyone else.”

Eren groaned loudly. She remembered, she had admitted as much herself. She may have been much older, but she was his Annie, through and through. Now, it was like she was playing dumb just to mess with him, and it was working.

“Trost,” he ventured. “Shiganshina! Stohess! Karanese! Uto—”

She silenced him by sliding her chair away from the table and moving to stand by the kitchen counter once more. “I know my geography, thank you.”

Eren gritted his teeth. “Remember, Annie! You were *there*!”

“Excuse me?” she asked, but something caught in her voice that gave Eren hope that he was getting somewhere.

“Eve!” he was almost pleading now, leaning halfway across the table on his elbows, but she held his one taste of home just out of his reach. “Do you know about Eve, too?”

Annie just stared at him. She stared at him like he was insane. She stared at him like too many people had stared at him since he had woken up. It made him want to scream. Instead he clenched his fists and tried to keep his voice even.

“Eve is you,” he growled. “She died and you were born. Back at the police station, you understood me. You remember! I know you do!”

She didn’t move. She didn’t even blink.

“Remember,” Eren begged. “Please, Annie. Please remember.”

He held his breath as her eyes swept over his face. By the time she looked away to set her mug on the counter, he was half convinced she would open her mouth and speak in the common tongue. Instead, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, cool as anything.

Eren was on his feet in a blink, his chair flying behind him. Somewhere in the other room, the dog began barking like mad. “Liar!” he accused.

For once, Annie looked taken aback. “What?”

“Liar!” he repeated. “You always used to tuck your hair like that when you were bluffing!”

“How would you know?” she asked, but there was enough of a moment’s hesitation that Eren knew he had her. “Where do I know you from?”

He heaved an exasperated sigh and told her again. “Eden.”

Annie’s brow furrowed and she shook her head. “That’s impossible.”

Eren straightened to his full height. He was taller than Annie, just as he was taller than Levi, but it was rare for him to take full advantage of the difference.

“They said surviving inside a rock for two thousand years was impossible, too,” he said so evenly it surprised even him.

She stared. Her mouth opened, either in surprise or in preparation for an argument, then closed again. Her brow rose, then furrowed. At long last, she said, “you actually expect me to

believe you're him?"

He nodded, sure that she must be able to hear his heartbeat from where she stood but refusing to back down.

"And that they left Mr. Discovery-of-the-Millennium alone long enough for him to run away?"

The guilt Eren had been trying to hard to push out of his mind was back again in full force. He crumpled a little and tried to shrug it off. "They were unusual circumstances."

She gripped the counter and said nothing.

"Annie—"

"Don't." She cut him off. "Don't call me that."

The dog was still barking, but she made no effort to quiet him. After a long, uncomfortable silence, Eren swallowed, righted the chair, and awkwardly sat down again. He had never told anyone before without Levi's permission; he had been made to swear to guard the secret with his life. If word got out, Levi had said, everything would be different. There was no knowing what could happen. People might come to take him away, or to watch him without a moment's peace.

Eren watched the curls of steam rise from his tea until he heard Annie pick up her mug again.

"You're wrong," she said quietly. "I don't remember." Eren immediately opened his mouth to protest, but this time it was Annie who cut him off. "I dream."

He promptly closed his mouth again.

"Nothing too specific," she waved, forcing herself to meet his eye. "Certainly not memories. Disjoint images, mostly, but your face is... familiar."

"We were..." He struggled to find a word for it in either language, but came up blank for both. Truth be told, he had avoided thinking about it for over three years now. Annie was as hard to pin down with a word as she was in the sparring fields. "...friends."

She swirled the tea in her cup into a cyclone. "I see."

Silence settled once more, and Eren suddenly found himself at a loss for what to say. He was close, so close he could almost taste the thrill of seeing her eyes light up at the sight of him. Because, of course, she must have missed him too in all her years, too. But words were never Eren's forte when it came to Annie. She always knew exactly what to say and how to say it to get across a thousand different meanings at once, and in her presence Eren would often find himself struggling just to form one. She had that uncanny ability to keep him unsteady on his feet whether it be on the sparring grounds or off. It was only in combat that he ever came close to having an understanding of her, and perhaps selfishly he felt that it was when she best understood him. And he was certain, absolutely certain, that she must feel the same.

His feelings now were familiar. He had struggled with this before, when he was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, sitting cross-legged in the depths of Sina's underground with a torch and a thousand confusing feelings buzzing around in his skull. And she had hung there, still as the grave, never aging or moving or parting her lips to answer the questions Eren thought then whispered then screamed at her until his throat went hoarse. And if he could touch her, if he could just touch her, if he could just get through to her, it would all be okay.

He couldn't touch her then, but he could touch her now.

The chair scraped against the tiling. Annie didn't move. The dog had quieted somewhere behind a closed door. Eren's steps were quiet, but to his ears they came like thunder. He could touch her. He could touch her. He could finally *communicate*.

"What are you doing?" she asked when his hand was just inches from her cheek.

He froze. She had turned her cheek away from him, and if there was one thing he dare not do, it was touch Annie Leonhardt without her permission.

"I just thought..." he began.

"Thought what?"

"Maybe you would remember... if I..." It suddenly seemed so perverse. He felt like he was standing on a mountain that was crumbling to sand under his feet. "...touched you."

Annie turned away completely and put a few steps' distance between them. Eren's stomach sank.

"Who says I want to remember?" she asked so quietly he might have missed it under the buzz of the electric lights.

It was a question Eren had never considered before, and in his tensed panic didn't stop to mull it over now. "Why wouldn't you?"

Annie crossed her arms, but with her cup still in hand it looked less like a gesture of control and more like one of self-comfort.

"They are not pleasant dreams, Eren." She said. Her eyes met his and he knew it was true. "If you really lived them, you would know."

It had been the life of a soldier—a life at war—but it was hardship shared. It had all been worth it because there were people who understood because they lived that life with you. And now no one remembered; no one understood. Eren knew better than anyone how hard it was.

"You have to," he found himself saying, knowing just how childish he sounded.

"Why?" Annie asked, defensiveness creeping into her voice. "Why do I have to?"

Her tone flared something up in Eren in return. "Because no one else does!"

“Good!” Annie snapped back. “Good for them, really. They should consider themselves lucky.”

“But Annie—”

“*Don't.*” Her voice was dangerous now. Barely over a whisper, and shaking like something barely controlled. “*Don't* call me that.”

He couldn't make her understand. Not with words. He couldn't. There were no words. There was only shared language he had, and he groped for it again now. Again, Annie stepped out of the way. Her cup clattered when she slammed it down the counter like a judge's mallet.

“Stop!”

“But—”

“No!” she all but shrieked. “You think I enjoy watching myself gleefully murder strangers?” She stopped, breathing hard. Eren had no response. “Or the sensation of flesh crawling out of my eyes? Or hundreds of razor blades slicing at my muscles until I can't stand? You think it's easy coming to work and having Mark wish me a good morning when an hour before I hurled his mutilated corpse into a storefront with the taste of his brains still on my tongue? You think I want to remember all that after the *decades* I spent trying to forget? Do you?”

For a moment, Eren forgot how to breathe. It didn't make sense. None of it. Stunned into silence, all he could do was whisper one word.

“Annie...”

Her eyes were ice and they were fire and they were death. “It's *Anne*.”

She turned heel and walked. Shoulders tense, fists clenched, with nothing but a hiss of “be out by morning,” she was gone. Eren heard a door slam and then there was nothing at all, nothing but a single, all-encompassing realization.

She was right. She was no Annie. She looked like her, walked like her, talked like, but she wasn't. And that meant Annie was dead. Everyone was.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: [some lovely Annie fan art!](#)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Gore warning.

He felt like he was deep underwater in a hot bath. There were voices calling his name, distant but so familiar, somewhere far above him. He anchored his will to them, summoned his strength, and pushed his way to the surface.

For the first time in hours, fresh air flooded his lungs. It was so cold it burned his throat but he gulped it down like a drowning man, past the stench of blood and evaporating flesh.

“Eren!” Armin shouted next to his ear. “Eren, can you hear me?”

Eren’s head felt like it was full of stones and cotton, but practice had paid off and he could maintain consciousness. He could feel the dull throb of Mikasa cutting away seething flesh from his arm, and the yank of Armin trying to pull him loose.

“It was all for nothing,” he mumbled to no one in particular.

“What?” Armin asked. “What did the Beast Titan tell you?”

“If we lose, we die,” Eren recited. “If we win, everyone dies.”

The cruelty of it all surged through him. The rage. The injustice. He knew he needed to direct it somewhere, but there was nowhere to put it all. He raised a free fist and brought it down with an unsatisfying thump against what had moments ago been his own shoulder.

“Fuck!” he swore. “Fuck!”

“Hold still,” Mikasa scolded.

Eren did no such thing. The flesh just sloughed off him as he wiggled free by his own accord.

“Careful!” Armin urged, but too late. There were too many pieces of titan missing and too many already melted away, and Eren suddenly found himself pitching head first into the snow. It broke his fall but he made no effort to get up again. His skin was still too feverish to feel the full extent of the cold.

Free of the cloud of titan vapor, he could see the battlefield more clearly, painted white and red like the roses beyond Wall Sina. The fight still raged on, but with no one quite sure who was in command of it anymore. There was no clear winner, only hell and mutual slaughter.

Armin and Mikasa were at his side in the blink of an eye and a hiss of compressed air.

“Are you hurt?” Mikasa asked.

“It’s isn’t *fair*,” Eren growled through his teeth as he sat up.

“What happened?” Armin asked again.

“Those bastards. They knew all along!”

“Know *what*, Eren?” Mikasa shouted over him.

Eren sucked the freezing air in through his teeth. “When the Ape Ti—I mean the First Titan dies, it sends out a shockwave of some kind. It’ll wipe out anything human, or once human. The only safe places are here at his hideout and inside Wall Maria.”

Mikasa and Armin exchanged looks.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” Mikasa said.

Eren shook his head. “Wall Maria can’t protect anyone when it’s broken.”

“What about the other walls?”

He merely shook his head.

“Then we just have to plug the hole in Shiganshina, don’t we?” Armin asked.

“How? With what?” Eren snapped, harsher than he meant to. “There’s no time to get there, much less reassemble the gate! A boulder isn’t going to cut it!”

There was silence but for the wind and distant cries of battle as the gears churned in Armin’s head.

“What if we don’t need a boulder,” he said at last. “We could just complete the ring as if there were no gate there in the first place.”

“What do you mean?” Eren asked.

“I mean, wouldn’t it have the same effect if we plug the hole with the same material the Walls are made of? That is to say, Eren, do you think you can do what Annie did? Encase yourself in crystal?”

The full insanity of the gamble settled in the pit of Eren’s stomach. “I... I think so,” he said. “I can try. But it would take me days to run there. I wouldn’t make it in time.”

“There’s no need,” Armin said, looking out to the North. There in the distance, the Walls were just barely a speck on the horizon. “All we need is... is a big catapult!”

“Did you hit your head?” Eren asked. “Where are we supposed to get a catapult?”

Armin's eyes darted back the other way. Eren and Mikasa followed his gaze to the slab of rock jutting from the snow not far off, exposed by the heat of a multitude of titan bodies. The Armored Titan was gone now, armor, bones and all, leaving only bits of what had once been its pilot before its head had been torn clean off and his nape mutilated by a well-placed jaw. The remains of the culprits lay steaming around the site and at the center a single figure sat hunched over the largest remaining piece.

"No," Mikasa said immediately. "Absolutely not. I won't allow it. No."

"It's the only way, Mikasa," Armin pleaded. "What choice do we have?"

"Then I'm going with Eren," she stated definitively.

"You can't," Armin retorted. "He'll be able to regenerate the damage of impact; you won't. He'll never be able to shield you properly."

"Besides," Eren added. "You're... you're humanity's strongest now. You're needed here."

"I don't care!" she snapped. "I won't let that monster just toss you and have no idea whether you live or die!"

"I'll be okay!" Eren shouted back. "How about you trust me for once!"

"I don't want to lose you! I don't want you to die!"

"I won't die then!"

"How can I *know* that?" Her voice was shaking.

"Just trust me! Trust Armin's plan!"

"I—" Mikasa stopped suddenly and looked from Eren to Armin and back again. Her lip trembled and she pulled her scarf up to her nose to hide it, but there was no point. Before the first tear could even break free of her lashes there were two sets of arms wrapped around her. A sob wracked her shoulders and no one said anything at all.

"I don't want to lose you," Mikasa repeated again at last. This time it was not an argument but a resignation. "Not again."

"Then live," Eren said into her hair. He planted a kiss there and then pulled back to have a look at her face. "Live and fight." He cupped her cheeks in his hands and smiled. "Buy me time." He wiped her tears away with his thumbs. "Protect Armin."

Mikasa searched his face. "Promise I'll see you after."

"I promise," he said. Two thousand years in the future, it was a word Eren would see scratched into the dirt outside Stohess. Literally, it meant to swear one's life to a cause. "I promise."

He slung an arm around Armin then too and pulled the three of them so close their foreheads were touching. Together, they formed a tent to shield each other from the outside world. If only for a moment, it was possible to forget. They were children again, ignorant of war, in a field of wildflowers by the river.

Then the moment passed and they were on a battlefield once more. The three stood and Eren leaning on Mikasa for support, made their way to the figure in the snowmelt. He didn't seem to notice them as they approached. His eyes were glazed and fixed straight down at the viscera he clutched in his trembling hands. Gore went up past his elbows, up his legs, and down the front of his shirt. Most of it was not his own. The intestines were not his either, spilled instead out of the partial torso and half a thigh cradled in his lap. The body was in no way any longer identifiable but there was no question as to whose it was.

Mikasa tried to grab at Armin's sleeve to keep him from going any closer, but he gently pulled her hand off and stepped forward.

“Bertholdt?”

The figure looked up as if snapped from some dream. His eyes flickered between the three soldiers.

“Bertholdt, we need your help,” Armin continued gently, like he was trying to talk down a wounded animal.

Bertholdt shook his head, his face a mess of blood and snot and tears. “No,” he croaked. “I can’t. I can’t.” His fingers tightened around the length of gut in his hands as he pulled it close to his chest and curled himself around it. “I can’t,” he wailed again. “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

“Pull yourself together,” Mikasa ordered.

Bertholdt dropped his head again. His shoulders shook, silently at first. It took Eren a second to realize he wasn’t crying but chuckling. He lifted his face, sat up straight, and laughed. It wasn’t the sound Eren had heard in the barracks three short years ago; it was a laughter wholly unhinged and terrifying in a deep, instinctual part of his brain that sent shivers up his spine. Even Mikasa froze before drawing her sword. She was shouldering Eren to lean onto the cliffside instead of herself when the laughter was cut short by the slap of flesh on flesh.

When Eren and Mikasa looked up, it was Armin with a shaking hand raised in the air. Bertholdt stared up wide-eyed at him as if he couldn’t believe himself what had just happened. With a bloody hand he reached up to touch his cheek and left a red smear behind. Slowly, Eren watched Armin’s fingers begin to curl into a fist.

Mikasa put herself between the boys in two strides only to hoist Bertholdt up by his shirt collar to his knees. The masticated flesh rolled off him with a squelch.

“You started all this,” she told him. If words were blades, Mikasa was an armory. “It’s time you helped us finish it.”

Bertholdt couldn’t bring himself to hold her gaze. The gale around them blew on.

“W-we need you to throw Eren,” Armin found his voice at last.

Bertholdt couldn’t seem to focus his eyes on him. “Throw Eren?”

“Back to the Walls. He’s going to plug the hole in Wall Maria.”

Bertholdt hung his head, a sickly smile slashed across his features. “I can’t,” he repeated.

Mikasa gave him a shake and wracked his body like a doll’s. “Yes, you can. You have a will of your own now. *Use it.*”

This time he said nothing, only shook his head a third time. He hadn’t cut his hair since the last anyone had seen of him, and now it hung over his eyes, obscuring everything. Eren opened his mouth to add his argument, but Mikasa was quicker.

Bertholdt gasped and choked when the reinforced steel pierced through his abdomen and out the other side. Even Armin yelped. Mikasa hitched the sword higher and a tendril of blood leaked from Bertholdt’s lips.

“I’ve seen you regenerate five limbs today,” Mikasa whispered to him, just barely audible over the wind. “You don’t have it in you to fix this. If nothing else, transform to save your own sorry life.” Bertholdt looked up at her with fresh tears in his eyes, but Mikasa just yanked her sword free and threw him down in disgust. “It’s all you ever cared for anyway.”

He landed on all fours and immediately clutched at his stomach. Blood leaked out between his fingers, accompanied, as Mikasa had rightly guessed, by only the tiniest wisp of steam. His other arm immediately slipped out from under him and he fell face first into the gore. Instead of grabbing for purchase, however, he groped around for the hunk of flesh he had been cradling earlier. Eren’s stomach churned but he couldn’t bring himself to look away as Berthold pressed himself to the carcass and buried his face in it. His arm tightened around his stomach wound and he wailed in pain or grief, it was unclear which. The sound rang across the mountaintop and was lost in the wind. When he finally quieted, Armin cleared his throat.

“That story you told,” he began quietly. “Back when we were just trainees, the one about how you and Reiner supposedly escaped the Fall. That wasn’t a complete lie, was it?” Bertholdt sobbed loudly. “You said you heard footsteps and you opened your window and there was a titan there. That really happened, didn’t it? Not at the Fall. Earlier. They really did take you.”

Bertholdt had stopped moving. “So that would mean,” Armin continued. “That if it wasn’t for them, you would both still be safe. Reiner would still be alive. You would both be human and ___”

“Shut up.” Bertholdt lifted his bloody face and looked up at Armin. Blood was smeared across his face and smudged in rivets where tears had tried to wash it away. “Shut up.” There was a long silence filled with nothing but wind and the sound of Bertholdt struggling to breathe. A gust whipped his hair wildly, and beneath it his eyes were wild with rage and grief and fear. “I’ll do it.”

Eren’s eyebrows shot up. “You will?”

For the first time, Bertholdt looked at him. "It'll go faster if you take my hand," he said, holding one out to him.

Mikasa moved to help Eren, but he pushed himself off the cliff face without her aid. His feet were still a bit unsteady, but despite how slick the rock now was with blood he didn't slip once.

"You two don't leave each other's side until this is all over, you hear?" he told his friends.

Armin nodded.

"Promise me," he insisted with an accusatory finger.

"I promise," Armin replied without hesitation. Mikasa, however, grabbed Eren's hand. He frowned at her, but the next words out of her mouth were not what he had expected.

"I love you," his sister said.

Through worry and exhaustion, Eren found it in him to smile. "I love you too. I'll see back home."

Mikasa smiled too, a sad smile, before schooling her face back into that of a soldier. She let Eren's wrist slip from her grasp, but her fingers trailed along his as he moved off, a last warm reminder. Though both were acutely aware of it in that moment, either mentioned that it was still unknown whether the crystal Eren would lock himself into was one he could ever escape.

Bertholdt's hands by contrast were slippery and cold, but at least he wasted no time. Armin and Mikasa retreated to a safe distance, and the last glimpse Eren caught of them they were standing side by side, as promised. Their hands were linked between them.

Without warning, the air was cut by lightning and when the vapor cleared Eren was looking out over the battlefield from the palm of a colossal hand. He tried to spot his friends again but they were lost somewhere among the snow. In the distance, he could see the Walls sprawled out in the endless green landscape.

Below, the Ape Titan lifted his head and roared. With a flash of light, the Rogue Titan joined his call in opposition. Muscle and bone creaked, the world shifted beneath him, and suddenly Eren was airborne.

He expected to wake on impact as he always did when he dreamed, but his flight over the open landscape was cut short with a loud crash shortly after takeoff. Eren jolted into consciousness on a couch in a living room filled with boxes. Almost simultaneously, there was a hiss and a yowl and the thudding of little paws racing out of the room. By the time Eren sat up, the cat was nowhere in sight.

Good riddance. He sneered at the doorway before turning his attention to what had spooked it, a toppled box in the corner. Inside had been papers, now fanned across the floor. Eren sighed. Sleep had not come easily, and it would not return easily, either. The clock on the

mantel read 4:51; too late too sleep, too early to rise. Eren stretched his sore muscles, rubbed his aching eyes, and rolled onto the floor. It would be in poor taste to leave the room worse off than he had found it. Annie thought badly enough of him as it was.

He never did see her again after she stormed from the kitchen, but that didn't mean their conversation didn't play over and over again in Eren's mind until the hours grew small. He picked apart her words and movements until memory failed him, trying to prove wrong the first thought he had when she had disappeared from view.

She had been right. She wasn't Annie. As desperately as Eren wanted her to be, she just wasn't. She looked like her. She even sometimes acted like her. She thought like her, certainly, in some respects, but when it came down to it, Annie Leonhardt was dead. Had been. Would always be. No matter how hard Eren wished or tried to force someone to be her. Anne had been right, and Eren had been wrong.

Worse yet, Eren realized, he had been wrong a lot. He had let familiar faces fool him, every last one. He had asked them each in turn, and treated every wrong answer like a slight against himself. Like friends who had abandoned him, when he it was he who had never returned.

He had called Hanji fake, he remembered. How angry he had been then, and how empty he felt now. She had been no fake. She was not the Hanji he had known, but that didn't make her less than. She was a different person, impossible to compare, but still passionate and curious and well-meaning. She must be worried now.

And then there was Levi. It made Eren feel sick to his stomach just thinking about it. For months he had struggled to reach his captain. Searched for him, expected him, and refused to get to know the man that took him in when there had been no reason to. Eren had been a stranger to him, and Levi had been his first friend. And what did Eren do the second that friend had shown a weakness he had thought beneath his captain?

He had abandoned him. He had left him to die alone.

Eren shoved the papers into the box and fought back tears. He failed on both counts, and several papers flew out over the floor again. He threw them back into the box like they had wronged him, all but the one that had managed to fly out of reach. He threw himself across the carpet to get to it, and when he finally pulled it back, two familiar names caught his eye.

It was a child's drawing. Depicted was a brown trollish creature with shaggy black hair and too many teeth. Its jaw was twisted in a jagged grin too wide for its face, and in place of eyes, two green sequins were glued to the paper. *Annie L.*, the corner of the page read in a childish scrawl, *age 4*. And right underneath that, *for Eren*. He hadn't the faintest idea what it could be—he'd never seen the thing in his life—but he had no doubts that the Eren in question was him.

And that maybe, just maybe, it was from Annie. His Annie. What was left of her.

His eyes darted to the doorway, but there was no one there but the cat.

“She doesn’t want to remember,” Eren told him, wiping tears with his sleeve. Saying it for himself, out loud, made it that much more final. The cat watched and judged, unmoved and unmoving. Eren looked down at the picture again, holding it like a fragile manuscript.

“You don’t think...” he wondered aloud. “You don’t think she would mind if I kept this, do you?”

The cat said nothing.

“Why am I asking?” Eren forced a chuckle as he folded the paper neatly and slipped it into his pocket. “You’re just a cat. The greatest genocide you’ve ever committed was probably against mice.”

He got to his feet, but somehow the drawing didn’t make him feel any better. If anything it only weighed him down, but for a piece of Annie he would bear it. He took up his coat and his bag and was just about to slip out the door when something in the kitchen caught his eye. There was a box on the table that had not been there before. He looked both ways down the hall as if taking a step further into the house might spring a trap, but everything was still and dark. Little by little, he crept into the kitchen to see what it was.

It was indeed a box, the cheap plastic kind used for takeaway at restaurants. It was hard to tell by the lamplight from outside what exactly was in it, but it could have been lasagna. Beside it was a handful of change and a note.

Take the 39a or the 145 from the stop around the corner and ask for the city center fare. Both will stop at the train station. Try not to get arrested again. -A.L.

Eren picked it up to see if there was anything on the back, and instead found that underneath it was a lightly crinkled €20 bill. At first he was afraid to touch it, but when it neither burned nor bit him on contact, he picked it up off the table and studied it over as if he couldn’t quite believe it was real.

He read the note two more times. The change was evidently for the bus, but what of the food and money? He couldn’t rightly accept them. He nearly didn’t, until he remembered how far he was likely to get without. Sure he had his bagels and water, but it was a long way to Berlin on foot. €20 might not get him there, but it would certainly shorten the trip, or buy him lodging, or food.

He glanced around in the dark for something to write a thank you with, but there were no writing utensils in sight. When he tried to look through one of the boxes in the corner, the rustle of the cardboard was so loud he gave up his search immediately. As a last resort, Eren straightened up and patted his pockets in case he had a pen he had forgotten about, but all he had left was the drawing. He traced the outline of it in the fabric of his pants pocket before finally deciding to pull it out for one more look.

The brown monster smiled at him. Eren’s eyes darted between it and the money on the table. He *could* take both. He could, and Annie would be none the wiser, but there was a horrible sickly feeling in his stomach at the thought. The paper in his hands seemed to weigh a

thousand tons. In a moment of desperation he even looked to the cat for help, but it was nowhere in sight.

It was a decision between a piece of Annie or a glimpse of her. If he was going to be honest with himself, he wasn't too sure he even wanted that glimpse anymore. What would he say to her? All he could think was to apologize profusely and leave. And go where? There was nowhere left for him. Not a single place in this great wide world he had dreamed of as a child. How empty and lonely and too, too big it all was when there was no one to see it with you. Now that he had had a taste, all he wanted to do was go home.

A saying from his world swam up in his memory. *Home is where the heart is.* The problem was that Eren's heart had fractured into so many pieces he didn't know where it lay anymore. One piece was frozen somewhere up north in the city that had once tried to rebuilt part of Wall Maria. Another lay dying in Frankfurt. Might already be dead, Eren realized with a start. Levi could very well have died alone with no one at his side, just as before, and again Eren would be there too late to do anything. He didn't think he could take it a second time. It may have been thousands of years since then, but to him it had only been a few months.

He didn't need to dream to still be on that mountain. Sometimes it felt more real than being awake. A part of Eren never wanted to think about it again, but the rest of him knew those memories were all he had left. He didn't want to let go. It would leave him with nothing at all.

Except...

He was doing that thing again. He was forgetting there were people—different from how he remembered them and distinctly their own—that might still be waiting. He could run off to Berlin and set himself adrift in a long-dead past, or he could return and try. Home is where the heart is, and what little heart was still beating beat for him in the place he had spent two days trying to escape. Even if he turned back, he would never forget. He could never turn his back on the past. It would be with him always, but that didn't mean he couldn't make room for something else.

Eren smoothed the drawing flat against the edge of the table to the best of his ability, being careful not to loosen the sequin eyes. His hand shook slightly as he pressed it down in the same spot where Annie's note had been. He held it and held it and held it.

And then he took a deep breath, let it out, and let go.

The bus stop around the corner was not hard to find. The streets were wet but the sky was clear now and the air was clean and crisp. Eren waited at the stop for about half an hour until the buses began to run for the day. He alternated between pacing and sitting, every fiber of him alive with a strange kind of nervous energy that made eating impossible. When the right bus finally pulled up, he threw in his change and did as Annie's note said. The sun had just begun to rise when the bus finally pulled up into areas Eren recognized. Three stops later, he was at the train station.

There was no line at the ticket window this early in the day.

“Maybe I help you?” the woman at the ticket window asked. She was much younger than the one at the last station.

Eren slid the €20 toward her.

“Student,” he said. “One way.”

“Where to?”

Eren swallowed. His mouth was suddenly very dry. “How far can I go?”

The young woman frowned. “Well,” she said, looking at something on her computer screen. “On €20 you can go north to Kassel, or west to Siegen, or south to Frankfurt.”

Eren clenched and unclenched his fist. The name Kassel rang a bell. It had been one of the stops on his journey that he had decided on in Giessen: north to Kassel, west to Halle, northwest to Berlin. He stood at a crossroads now: north to the past, south to the present. The past was painful but it was familiar; the present was frightening and new and vast and unknowable. Either path might lead him to a corpse.

“Are you alright, sir?” the woman asked.

Eren remembered to breathe. He loosened his grip on the counter and nodded.

“Where to?” she asked again.

Only one path might give him a chance to say goodbye. No, a chance to say thank you.

“Frankfurt,” he croaked.

The ticket printed impossibly slowly. Eren bit his lip and waited until it was finally passed to him. By the time he turned away from the ticket window his lip tasted of blood and his vision blurred with tears completely. They kept coming, unbidden, like snow on a war-torn mountaintop village, and Eren could do even less to stop them. Only when he dropped himself down on the train and pulled Armin’s book onto his lap did the torrent finally seem to stop, and with the respite came a deep, dreamless sleep.

Eren only awoke when someone in the isle bumped past him. He jolted awake and looked around. He was still on the train, but it was no longer moving. Panic gripped his stomach as he searched for a sign of which station it might be. He needn’t look far; at the front of the car, a line of red lights scrolled across in an endless loop to read *FRANKFURT (MAIN) HBF*. Without a second thought, he flung his backpack over his shoulder and ran for the doors, fighting his way through a stream of people moving in the opposite direction.

In among the bustle of voices, someone was shouting, but Eren didn’t stop to listen. Only when he was through the doors and safely on the concrete did he finally pause to give himself a moment to breathe. The city stretched out before him in the morning light. He could just make out the hospital up on the hill. A cold hand gripped his stomach at the sight just as a much warmer one suddenly clamped onto his shoulder.

"Hey!" its owner said in between trying to catch his breath.

Eren turned. In front of him was a young man no more than five years older than he was. The top of his blond head fell at about Eren's eyeline and his hair was longer than Eren remembered, but his smile just the same.

"You forgot this," he said, holding out his book.

Eren patted his backpack and realized he was right. It must have slid off his lap on the train. His hands trembled as he reached to take it back, not quite willing to believe what he was seeing was real.

Behind the man, the doors of the train began to hiss closed, stopped only by a hand darting out at the last second to catch them. A gold ring on the 4th finger caught the morning light. Detecting something in the way, the door emitted a warning screech and slid back open to reveal a young woman with short dark hair and strikingly familiar eyes.

"Come on," she called to the man. "Hurry up!"

The man glanced over his shoulder at her and hurriedly thrust the book into Eren's hands. It was somehow heavier than he remembered. Of course it was. Inside were fifty years of history written in careful words to protect Eren's existence and ensure his safety. Armin had crafted it not only to remember the past but to shape the future into one that his friend would be welcome in. The latter purpose was so much more important than the former. Why hadn't Eren realized it before?

"Keep it," he told the man, pushing the book into his arms. "It's yours."

The man cocked an eyebrow at him and flipped open to the first few pages. He had his mouth open to protest, but instead his jaw dropped open completely.

"This is—I—I writing my thesis on this!" He stammered. "You can read—"

"I can't hold it much longer," the woman interrupted. The door shrieked on as it slowly began to slide shut. The man gaped open-mouthed at Eren and then back at the book. Rolling her eyes, the woman planted a foot on the station platform and reached to tug her companion into the traincar by the back of his coat. He stepped back, dazed, without so much as tearing his eyes from the book. The woman studied Eren suspiciously.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" she asked Eren just before the door finished closing.

He chuckled despite his throat feeling like it was about to close up.

"No," he called into the final crack. "I don't think so. But nice scarf!"

The door closed. The train lurched into motion. At the last second, the man looked up and raised a hand in farewell. On his finger was a gold ring.

The last glimpse Eren caught of them they were standing side by side, as promised. He watched as they receded into the distance, until the train became nothing more than a spec on

the horizon. When at last it had disappeared from view completely, he found there was a smile on his face. He didn't know how it got there, or why, or when, but it was the lightest he had felt since getting his 3D Maneuver Gear back.

With one last look at the horizon, Eren wiped his eyes and ran for home.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Whoever had closed the curtains the night before hadn't done it properly, because come morning a tiny sliver of light peeked into the hospital room from between the folds of fabric. It appears first faintly on the ceiling and lingered there a while before makings its way down the wall. Levi had been watching it the past few hours for lack of anything else to do. The painkillers dripping into his arm made the endeavor out to be more captivating than it otherwise might be, but the real reason Levi hadn't moved to reach for his laptop or turn on the television or call for a newspaper were the limp fingers that just barely cradled his.

Hanji had never been the type of person to care much a sleep schedule. That a human should spend a third of her life asleep was either a fact that no one had deigned to tell her, or one she simply chose to ignore when it suited her. There were discoveries to be made, after all, and theories to consider, and experiments to run, so to find Hanji asleep was a rare thing indeed, even if it was only slumped haphazardly in a chair.

Today she looked more a mess than she normally did. Her hair was only half tied back, and rest laid out in unbrushed tangles across her face and shoulders. The clothes she wore were the same Levi had seen her in each time he had woken up. He had no concept of how long it had been, or even really how many times he had awoken. Each time it had only been a brief blur of light and conversation and confusion, but he was told that was normal. They had lowered his morphine dosages since then. In any case, judging by the unusually dark circles under Hanji's eyes, he had been doing the sleeping for both of them until now, but that was Hanji for you.

Not for the first time, Levi reached up to scratch at the itch on the side of his head and found plaster in place of scalp. He had no mirror, but by the feel of things the whole underside of his head had been shaved short. There was no way of telling how the rest of it fared, though he was not one to be hung up on such vanities when there had been a good reason for it. At least, he had been told there was good reason. He had no doubts of that much, but his own memories of the week or so leading up waking in a hospital bed in Frankfurt were tenuous at best. Hanji had filled in the rest for him, pieced together from several phone calls and his own meticulously kept dayplanner. She had even taken the liberty of ensuring his absence would be well minded, with nine rescheduled meetings, three guest lecturers, and approximately two hundred and fifty very grateful undergraduates whose term paper deadline had been pushed back two whole weeks. Ridiculous. Levi wouldn't know what he'd do without her. The very least he could do was let her sleep.

It was for this reason that he curled his lip at the knock on the door, and fixed the intruder with a vicious glare before their head even poked through the crack. The light spilling into the room lit up the vacant bed by Levi's side. He would have shooed whoever it was away entirely if it hadn't one of the last people Levi had expected to see. He had been assured, after

all, on a number of occasions that this very visitor was at this very moment safe and sound in the care of one Hanji's most trusted colleagues.

Levi pressed a finger to his lips and hurriedly waved him inside.

"Aren't you supposed to be with Moblit?" whispered as soon as the closed door drowned out the noise of the hospital hallway. His voice was still raspy from the tube that had been shoved down his throat the last two days, but they had taken the thing away, thank the goddesses. They'd left plenty of others behind, of course. One was in his nose and the rest in places he didn't want to think about.

Eren shifted his weight back and forth in the doorway and stared at his feet. If possible, he was even filthier than Hanji was. His hair stuck up at odd angles like he had slept with it wet and neglected to run a comb through it even once, and his clothes muddy enough to have seen him camping outside. His new sneakers had the worst of it, having been reduced from their sparkling white to a dingy brown and stuck with grass.

"Well don't just stand there," Levi sighed. "Pull up a chair. Quietly."

The boy did as he was told. He set it down at Levi's other side a little too loudly than Levi might have hoped. His eyes immediately darted to Hanji, but she barely even stirred, not even when Eren sat and the chair scraped slightly against the floor. Levi looked him up and down.

"You look you've been through hell and back," he told him.

Eren swallowed visibly. It wasn't hard to tell he was avoiding looking at the bandages, but he was failing every half a second or so. Levi fixed him with a look and Eren's eyes fall to the floor, though he half-consciously ran a hand through his own hair anyway.

Levi sighed and was halfway to reaching at that itch when he stopped himself. "I'm one to talk, I guess," he decided instead. Now he was the one avoiding eye contact, and by the time he forced look back again, Eren was watching him.

"Are you..." the boy began. It looked like he was trying to fold the rest of the words over in his mouth, or like he couldn't quite muster the breath to say them. In the end he just pursed his lips and looked to Levi pleadingly. His palms were pressed together in a prayer, clamped between his knees.

"I'll live," Levi shrugged. "It'll be at least a week before I'm allowed out of bed, but the danger's passed. Now breathe. You're starting to change color."

Eren exhaled a nervous chuckle, and Levi felt a little bad. In a week he would be out of bed, sure, but there wasn't likely to be any easy way of explaining months of rehab to a boy born nineteen centuries before physical therapy. Some of it could be done back home, but before that he had to be well enough to travel, and that alone could take a month or two. Perhaps he'd ask Hanji to take him in for the time being—she could certainly use some time away from the hospital herself—but if she returned him again in anything close to the state he was in now, he would throttle her. For real this time.

“Um,” Eren cleared his throat as quietly as possible. “Levi.”

Levi glared what little attention span he had to him. It was rare, even unheard of, for Eren to use his first name. On the odd occasion that he spoke when not spoken to, he had always used ‘sir’ or that archaic military rank of his. Never a first name on its own.

“How do you say...” He hesitated, scrambled to look anywhere but at Levi, and mumbled something at his feet.

“I didn’t catch that,” Levi said.

Eren mumbled the phrase again, a little louder this time. Levi caught the words, but trying to picture the spelling and matching it to a meaning proved harder than he remembered.

“Keep your voice down,” he reminded in the meantime. “Let me think.” He thought. In a better state he would have recognized it immediately, but at the moment it was like fighting an uphill battle against a waterfall. “Right,” he decided at last. “There’s two ways of translating that. It’s either ‘welcome back’ or ‘welcome home’. The two have slightly different meanings, but... why are you smiling at me like that?”

Eren wasn’t just smiling; he was absolutely beaming. At the question, he shook his head and looked away, but the grin remained on his face like sunlight. Levi was tempted to say he’d never seen him this happy, but he didn’t trust his memory enough for such grand assumptions.

“Why do you ask?” he said instead.

Eren’s smile dropped down an octave, and he looked of all things surprised.

“I...” he began, his eyes searching the room until they fell at last upon Hanji’s hand at Levi’s side. Eren cocked his head to the side, blinked a moment, and then wiped his own palm on his pants and reached forward. It hovered in a moment of hesitation, and then relaxed over Levi’s. Eren smiled at him. “Welcome... home,” he repeated.

On any other day Levi would have corrected him and shaken his filthy hand loose, but today he simply didn’t have the energy.

“Yeah,” he agreed instead. “Welcome home.”

Eren continued smiling. Levi found it in him to return just the faintest smile back.

He let his eyes close for a moment, and when he opened them again the beam of light from the window was half-way across the floor and Eren’s cheek was pressed into the back of his hand, sound asleep. On his other side Hanji had barely moved, her fingers still cradeling his.

Levi sighed. Once upon a time, he had preferred his pristine lab where every surface was covered in plastic, dusty manuscripts were restored under microscopes, and no one was allowed to so much as breathe without decking out head to toe in protective gear. But this was okay, too, he decided. Messy and filthy and broken, but okay.

Like family, almost, he thought as he drifted back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Well that turned out longer, weirder, and sadder than I expected. Thank you for all of your support throughout all this. I really, really, truly wouldn't have been able to finish it without each and every one of you. I hope it came together to your liking. If you ever need me, writing blog on tumblr has the same url as my pseud here on AO3.

Happy belated holidays,
Anya

Edit: [my thoughts regarding another sequel](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!